NEW

BOOK OF

VIKINGS

FROM THEIR ORIGINS & CONQUESTS TO THEIR LEGACY

EPIC FACTS & TALES INSIDE!

Digital Edition

FUTURE
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ALL ABOUT HISTORY

Welcome to

BOOK OF
VIKINGS

THE LEGEND of the Vikings is one that is shrouded in mystery. Their stories and myths have embedded themselves in popular culture, and those are the Vikings we see in films, books and TV shows. But the real Vikings – the Norse seafarers – led an existence that was often more incredible than any fictional tale. In this book, we tell that story, from their origins in Scandinavia to their expeditions across the seas. Known to be ruthless raiders and fearless fighters, discover how the Vikings expanded their empire and conquered new lands. Packed with fascinating facts and stunning imagery, find out what caused the end of the Viking age, what their remaining legacy is, and gaze upon the historical artefacts that help us understand more about these incredible warriors.

FUTURE

ALL ABOUT HISTORY

BOOK OF VIKINGS

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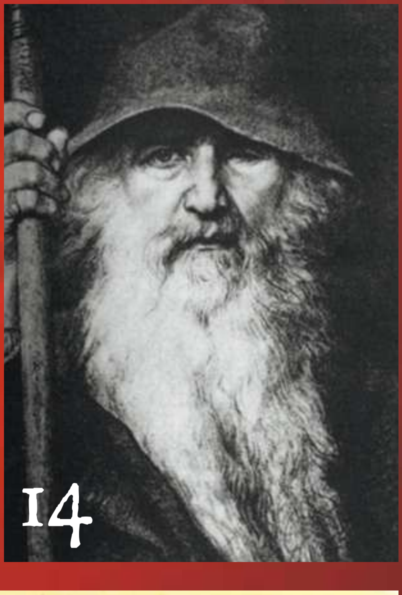
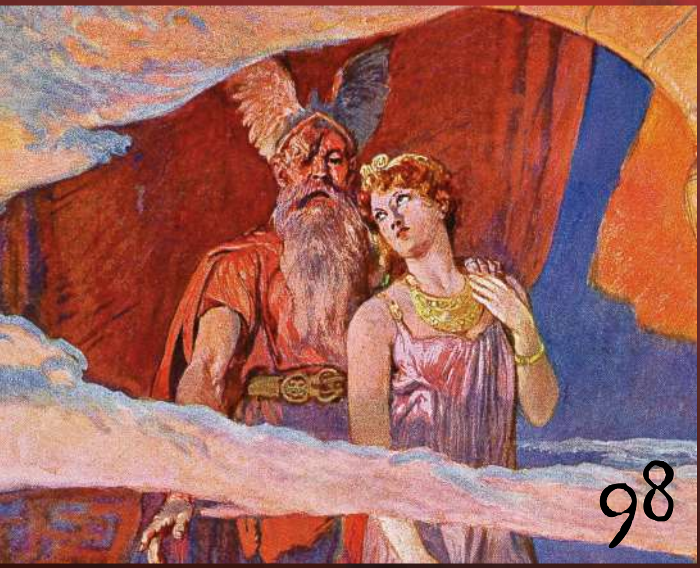
Contents

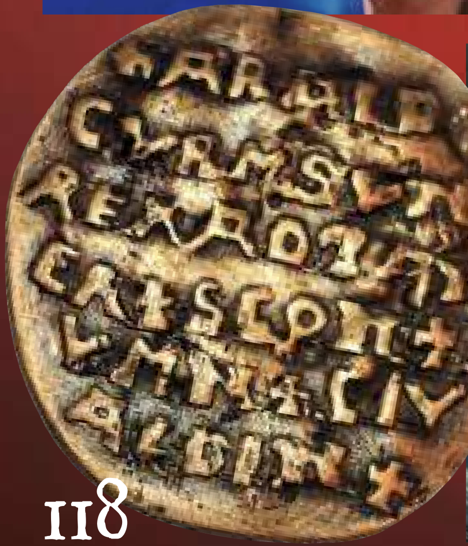
8 Blood and Sea

The Vikings

14 Before the North
18 Kingdom of the Northmen
22 Vinland the Good
30 Early Viking Raids on Britain
34 Alfred vs the Vikings
40 The Danelaw
44 The Vikings Return
48 Emperor of the North
56 The Last Viking King
62 Lost Kingdoms of the Vikings







Life & Society

74 Viking Justice
82 How to Survive Trial by Combat
84 Women in the Viking Age
86 How to Build a Viking Settlement
88 What is a Viking Saga?
94 Viking Heroes
96 Viking Myths
98 Gods of the North
102 The Cult of Thor

Their Legacy

114 A Scandinavian Legacy
118 21 Things That Will Surprise You About the Vikings
124 Remembering the Vikings

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Blood and Sea

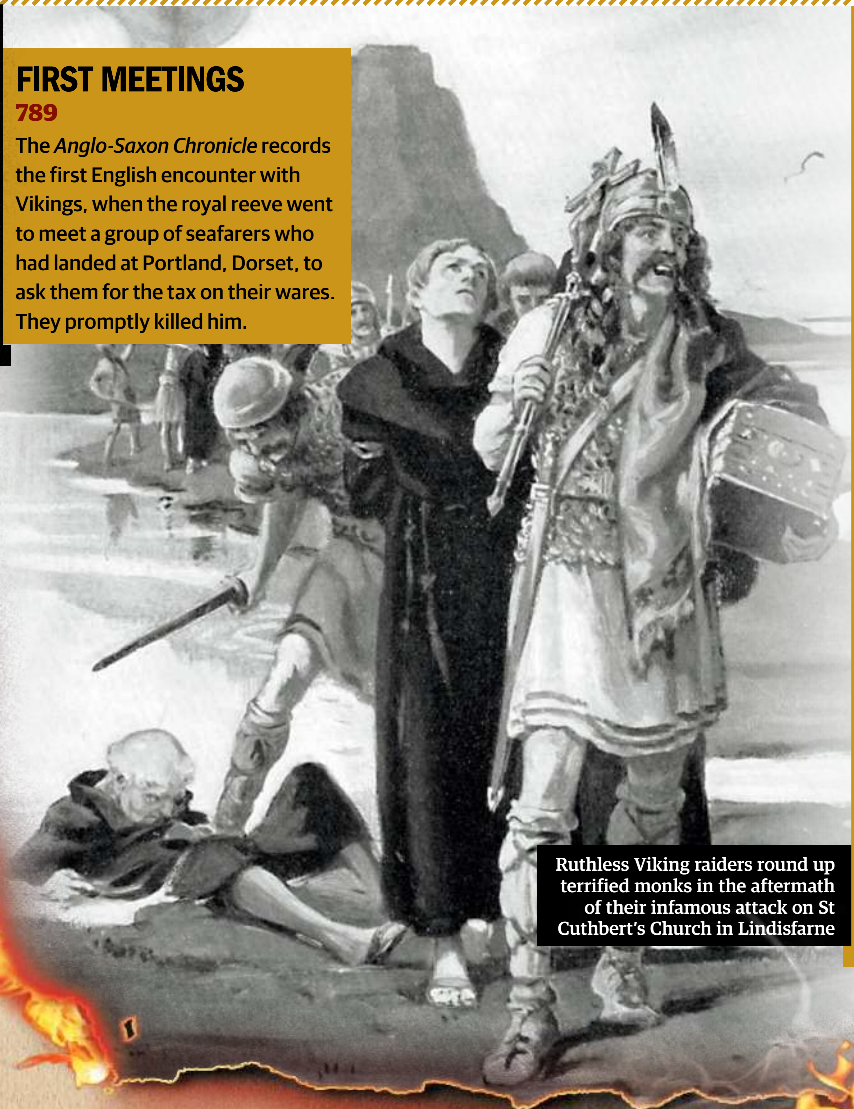
Traders, raiders, explorers and conquerors: Vikings changed the world

Written by Edoardo Albert

FIRST MEETINGS

789

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the first English encounter with Vikings, when the royal reeve went to meet a group of seafarers who had landed at Portland, Dorset, to ask them for the tax on their wares. They promptly killed him.



Ruthless Viking raiders round up terrified monks in the aftermath of their infamous attack on St Cuthbert's Church in Lindisfarne

THE BLOODY DAWN OF THE VIKING AGE

8 June 793

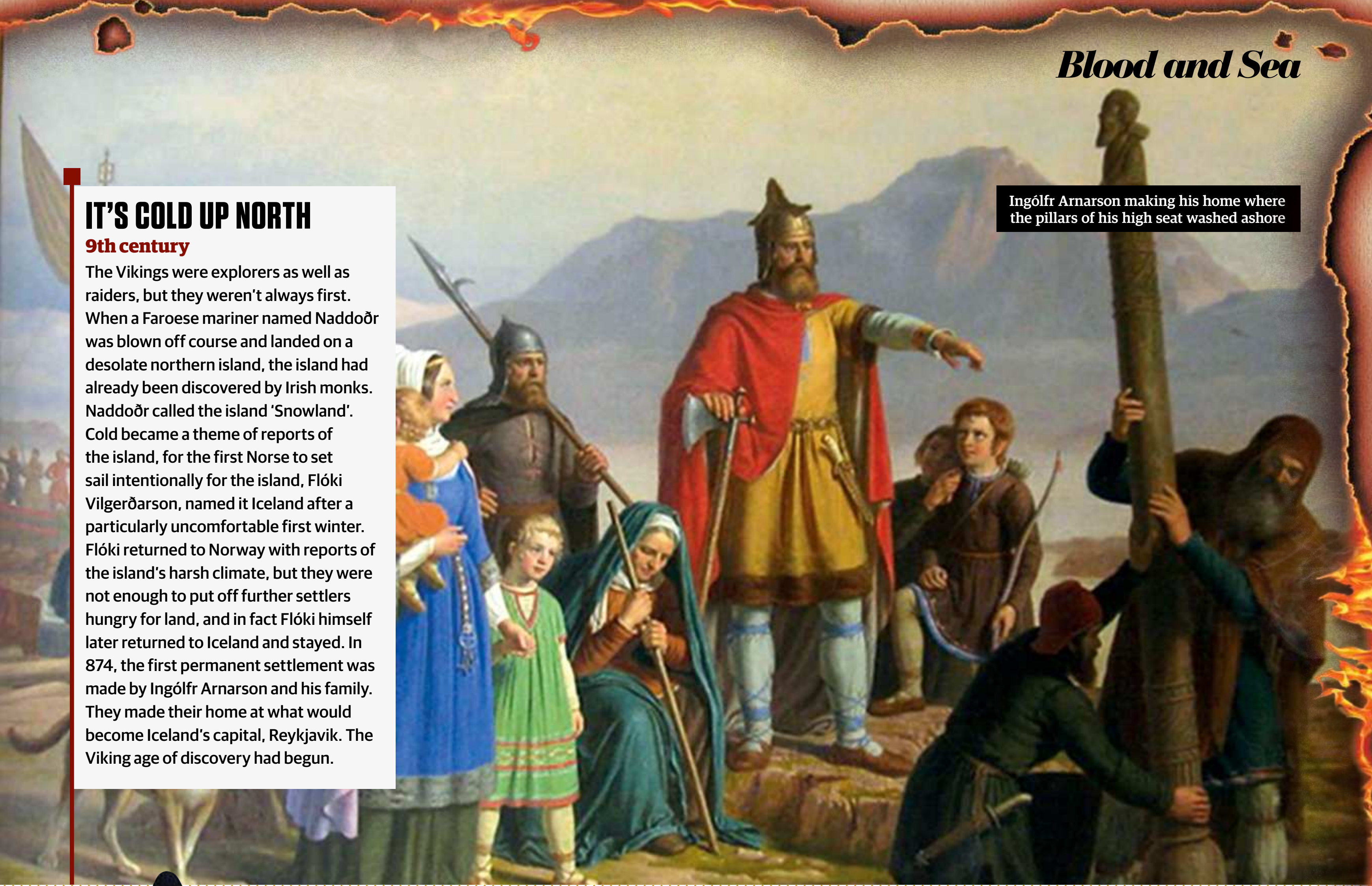
Imagine terrorists simultaneously destroying St Paul's Cathedral and defacing the *Mona Lisa*. The Viking attack on the monastery at Lindisfarne evoked the same horror, for Lindisfarne was the foremost spiritual and cultural centre of northeastern Europe, the mother house to which the churchmen who had initiated the Carolingian Renaissance looked for inspiration and support. Alcuin, the English scholar headhunted by Charlemagne for his court, expressed the widespread horror at the attack: "Never before has such terror appeared in Britain. Behold the church of St Cuthbert, splattered with the blood of God's priests, robbed of its ornaments." The attack on Lindisfarne is taken as the beginning of the Viking Age (which lasted until 1066), when the Norse undertook their remarkable explorations and unleashed havoc on Europe.

ANOTHER HOLY ISLE SACKED

806

The abbey on Iona, the mother house of the monastery on Lindisfarne, was attacked by Vikings in 795, 802, 806 and 825, with 68 monks dying during the 806 attack. After the massacre in 806, the monks established a (safer) abbey at Kells, but Iona remained the mother house until 878.

> "The royal reeve went to ask the Vikings for tax on their wares. They killed him"



Ingólfr Arnarson making his home where the pillars of his high seat washed ashore

IT'S COLD UP NORTH

9th century

The Vikings were explorers as well as raiders, but they weren't always first. When a Faroese mariner named Naddoðr was blown off course and landed on a desolate northern island, the island had already been discovered by Irish monks. Naddoðr called the island 'Snowland'. Cold became a theme of reports of the island, for the first Norse to set sail intentionally for the island, Flóki Vilgerðarson, named it Iceland after a particularly uncomfortable first winter. Flóki returned to Norway with reports of the island's harsh climate, but they were not enough to put off further settlers hungry for land, and in fact Flóki himself later returned to Iceland and stayed. In 874, the first permanent settlement was made by Ingólfr Arnarson and his family. They made their home at what would become Iceland's capital, Reykjavik. The Viking age of discovery had begun.

The elegant lines of the Oseberg ship showing its clinker-built construction

ACROSS OCEANS AND UP RIVERS

834

The Viking Age was a result of the perfecting of Norse ship-building technology. The longship interred in 834 in Oseberg, Norway, as the final resting place for two high-status women is a wonderfully preserved example of such a vessel, highlighting the workmanship that allowed these clinker-built boats (made from overlapping planks) to successfully navigate rivers, coasts and seas. These supremely flexible craft allowed eastern Vikings to navigate the rivers of Europe and were light enough for portage to the headwaters of the rivers feeding into the Black Sea, opening trade routes to Byzantium and all its riches. For long-distance ocean voyages, the Vikings built deeper, broader boats that relied on sail for propulsion, with oars mainly used when the wind failed. These 'knarr' were the boats that would later cross the Atlantic.

VIKINGS FOUND DUBLIN

841

Having raided around the Irish Sea for half a century, the Vikings needed a base. They chose Duiblinn, the 'black pool', which was already an important ecclesiastical site, for its natural harbour. At first, Dublin was a winter camp, a secure base from which to sally forth on summer raids, but it became the chief city of the Norse in Ireland.

VIKINGS HEAD EAST

862

While the Norwegians sailed west, Swedish Vikings went east and south, crossing the Baltic Sea and sailing upstream along the rivers draining into the sea. Traders, these Vikings discovered that portage – literally carrying their boats – allowed them access to rivers flowing to the Black and Caspian seas. According to the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, Rurik, a Northman, built the first settlement near Novgorod and established a dynasty that endured for 700 years.

VIKINGS ENTER MEDITERRANEAN AND START RAIDING

859-862

In 859, Viking chieftains Hastein and Bjorn Ironside set sail with 52 ships from their base on the Loire to raid the rich ports of the Mediterranean. The Spanish kingdoms put up stiff resistance, but the Viking fleet entered the Mediterranean and wintered at the mouth of the Rhone before raiding southern France and Italy. Trading with the Muslims of North Africa, Hastein bought slaves whom he later sold on at the Dublin slave market. All told, 20 ships made it back.

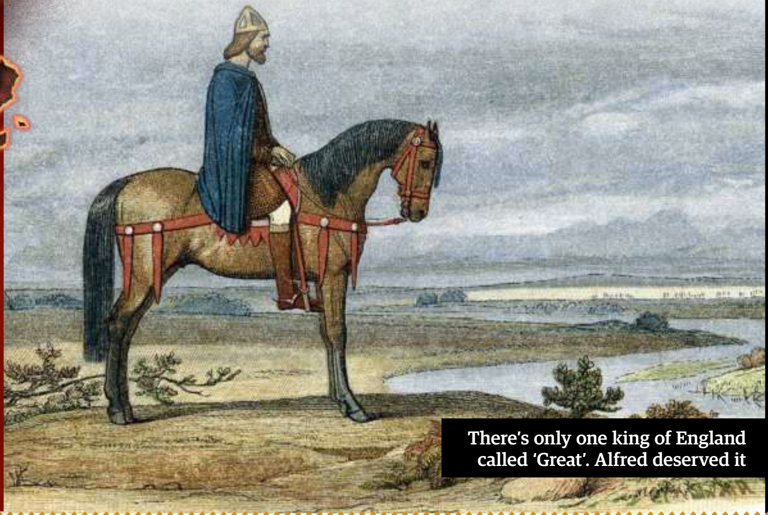
Images: Getty Images except Ingólfr Arnarson (pd)

THE GREAT HEATHEN ARMY

865-878

In 865 a Viking army landed on the Isle of Thanet in Kent bent on conquest, and over the next few years it destroyed the kingdoms of East Anglia and Northumbria and installed a puppet king in Mercia. Of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, only Wessex was left, with a young king in charge called Alfred.

Despite his youth, Alfred defeated the Vikings at the Battle of Ashdown on 8 January 871. He followed this up in 878 with a crucial victory at the Battle of Edington. The resulting treaty split the country between Alfred's kingdom and the Norse Danelaw. But Alfred's son and daughter, Edward and Æthelflæd, would later begin the reconquest of England, a mission his grandson, Æhelstan, completed in 927.

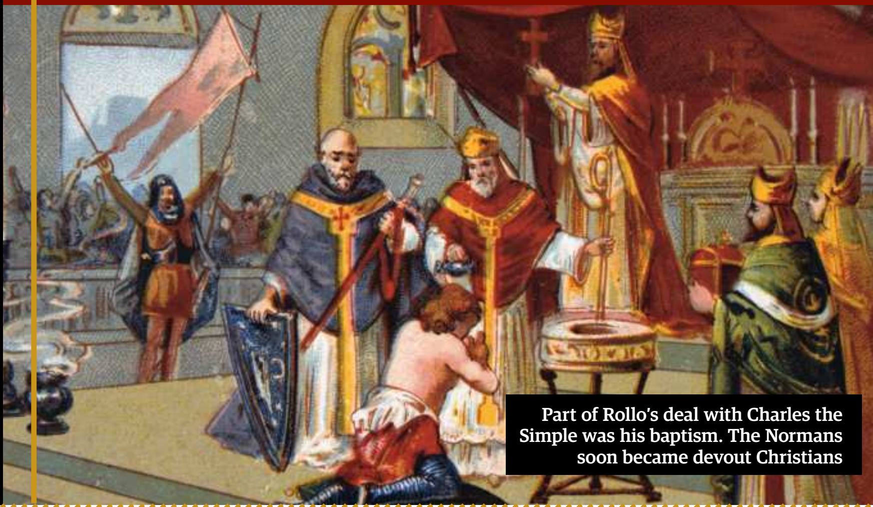


There's only one king of England called 'Great'. Alfred deserved it

NORTHMAN FOUNDS NORMANDY

911

The Carolingian Empire assembled by Charlemagne began to dissolve after his death. Among the Vikings attacking France was a Northman called Rollo. Having unsuccessfully laid siege to Paris, he set up his base on the estuary of the River Seine near Rouen, from where he raided for a decade. Unable to expel Rollo, Charles the Simple hit on the strategy of ceding the territory that Rollo had occupied to the Northman in return for Rollo swearing allegiance to him. Under the terms of the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, Rollo and his men converted to Christianity. The treaty did not preclude him from continuing as a Viking chieftain, and in the following decades he expanded his territory until, upon his death in 932, it included almost all the land that would become the Duchy of Normandy.



Part of Rollo's deal with Charles the Simple was his baptism. The Normans soon became devout Christians

VIKINGS FOUND KINGDOM IN YORK

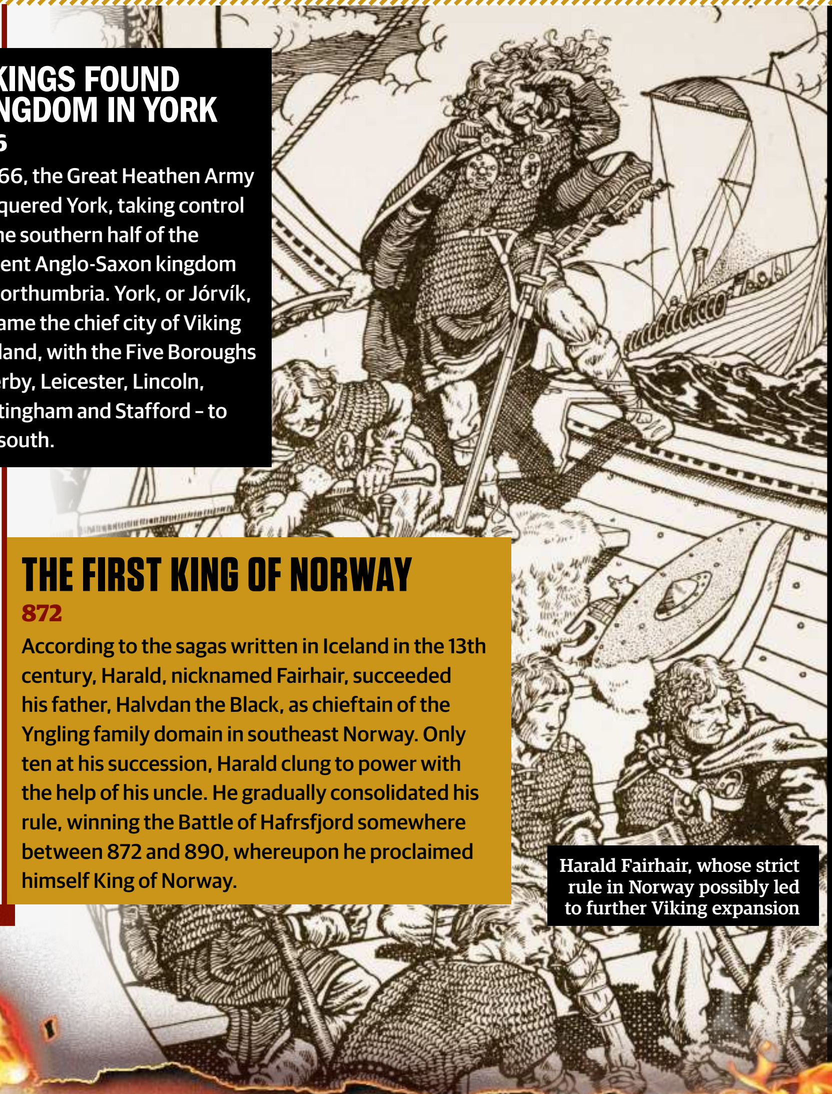
866

In 866, the Great Heathen Army conquered York, taking control of the southern half of the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. York, or Jórvík, became the chief city of Viking England, with the Five Boroughs – Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stafford – to the south.

THE FIRST KING OF NORWAY

872

According to the sagas written in Iceland in the 13th century, Harald, nicknamed Fairhair, succeeded his father, Halvdan the Black, as chieftain of the Yngling family domain in southeast Norway. Only ten at his succession, Harald clung to power with the help of his uncle. He gradually consolidated his rule, winning the Battle of Hafrsfjord somewhere between 872 and 890, whereupon he proclaimed himself King of Norway.



Harald Fairhair, whose strict rule in Norway possibly led to further Viking expansion

BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

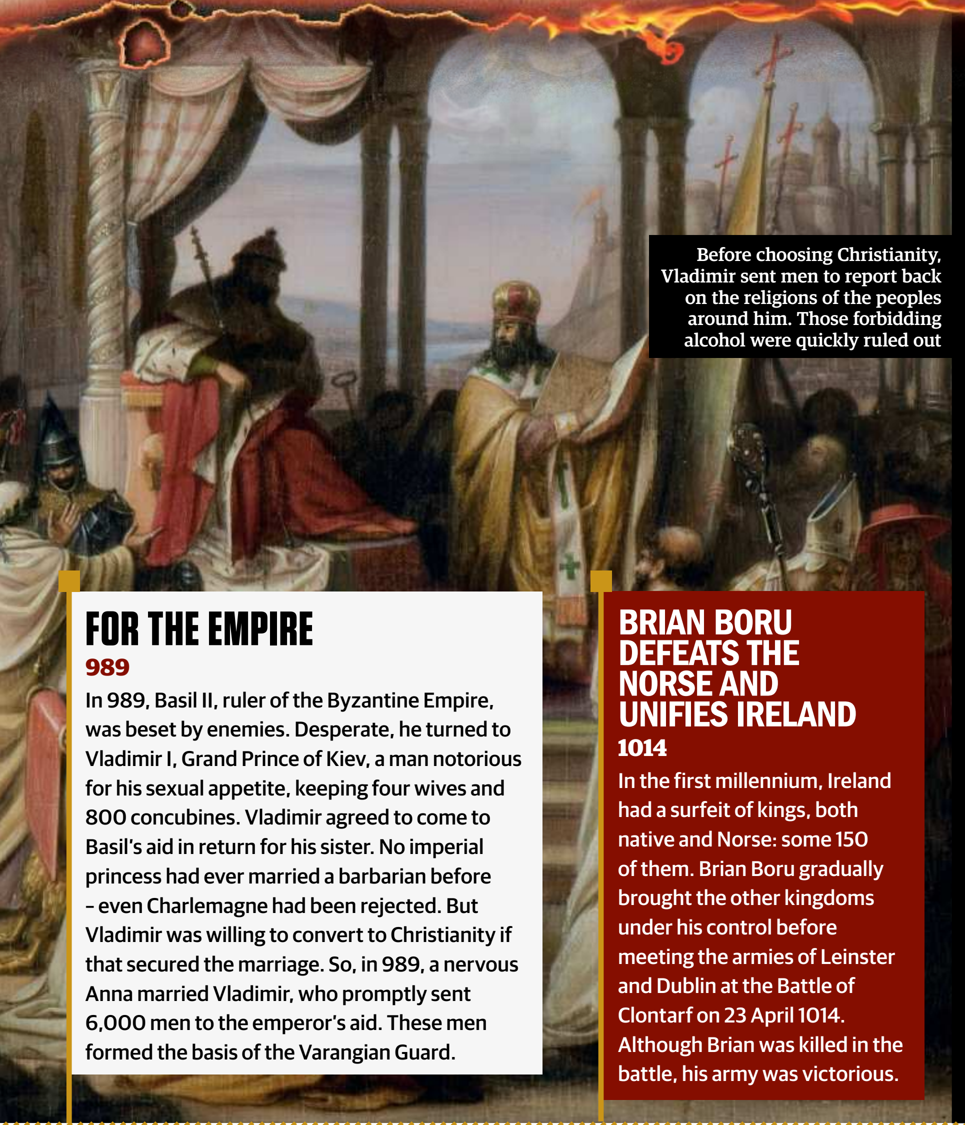
937

In 937, an alliance of Olaf Guthfrithson, King of Dublin, Constantine II of Scotland and Owain, King of Strathclyde, attempted to defeat King Æthelstan and seize England. Æthelstan's hard-won victory at the Battle of Brunanburh ensured that England remained unified.

THE LAST VIKING KING OF YORK

954

Eric Bloodaxe, whose nickname suggests the means by which he seized and kept power, was finally deposed as king of York. With his passing ended the Viking kingdom of Jórvík.



Before choosing Christianity, Vladimir sent men to report back on the religions of the peoples around him. Those forbidding alcohol were quickly ruled out

FOR THE EMPIRE

989

In 989, Basil II, ruler of the Byzantine Empire, was beset by enemies. Desperate, he turned to Vladimir I, Grand Prince of Kiev, a man notorious for his sexual appetite, keeping four wives and 800 concubines. Vladimir agreed to come to Basil's aid in return for his sister. No imperial princess had ever married a barbarian before – even Charlemagne had been rejected. But Vladimir was willing to convert to Christianity if that secured the marriage. So, in 989, a nervous Anna married Vladimir, who promptly sent 6,000 men to the emperor's aid. These men formed the basis of the Varangian Guard.

BRIAN BORU DEFEATS THE NORSE AND UNIFIES IRELAND

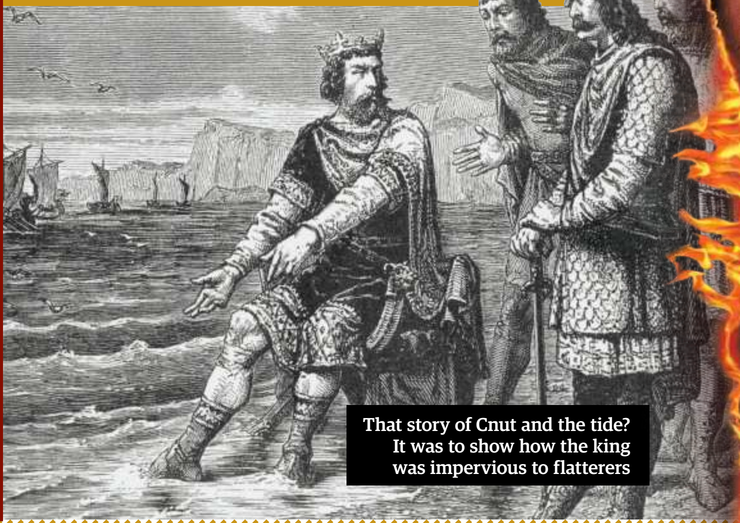
1014

In the first millennium, Ireland had a surfeit of kings, both native and Norse: some 150 of them. Brian Boru gradually brought the other kingdoms under his control before meeting the armies of Leinster and Dublin at the Battle of Clontarf on 23 April 1014. Although Brian was killed in the battle, his army was victorious.

THE FIRST VIKING CONQUEST OF ENGLAND

1016

By 1013, the most incompetent king in English history, Æthelred, had succeeded in so enraging Sweyn Forkbeard, king of the Danes, that Sweyn personally invaded England. Sweyn's efforts were successful, but he didn't live long to enjoy them, dying on 3 February 1014. Having fled, Æthelred returned as king, forcing Sweyn's son, Cnut, to flee. In August 1015, Cnut returned at the head of another invasion fleet. Over the next 14 months he battled Æthelred's son, Edmund Ironside, eventually completing the first Viking conquest of England.

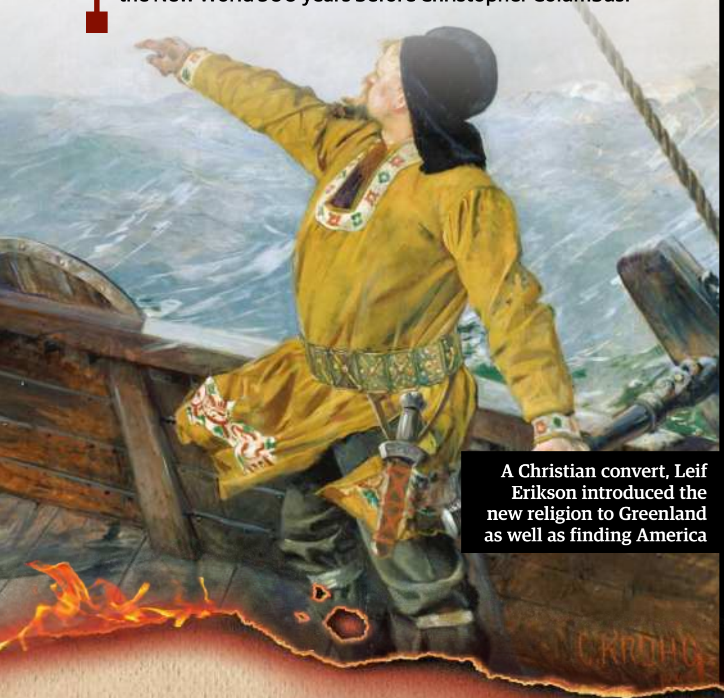


That story of Cnut and the tide? It was to show how the king was impervious to flatterers

TO GREENLAND AND BEYOND

982-c.1000

Around 982, an Icelander named Erik was exiled for murder by the island's assembly for three years. Rather than sail back to Norway, he set sail to investigate stories of a land further west. According to the sagas, he found and explored it for the term of his exile. Three years later Erik returned to Iceland with tales of this new land, which he named 'Greenland'. His son, Leif, would go even further in 1000 CE, gathering a crew to investigate reports of a land west of Greenland. Crossing 1,800 miles of sea, they eventually spotted it. They had discovered the New World 500 years before Christopher Columbus.



A Christian convert, Leif Erikson introduced the new religion to Greenland as well as finding America

PAYING THE DANE

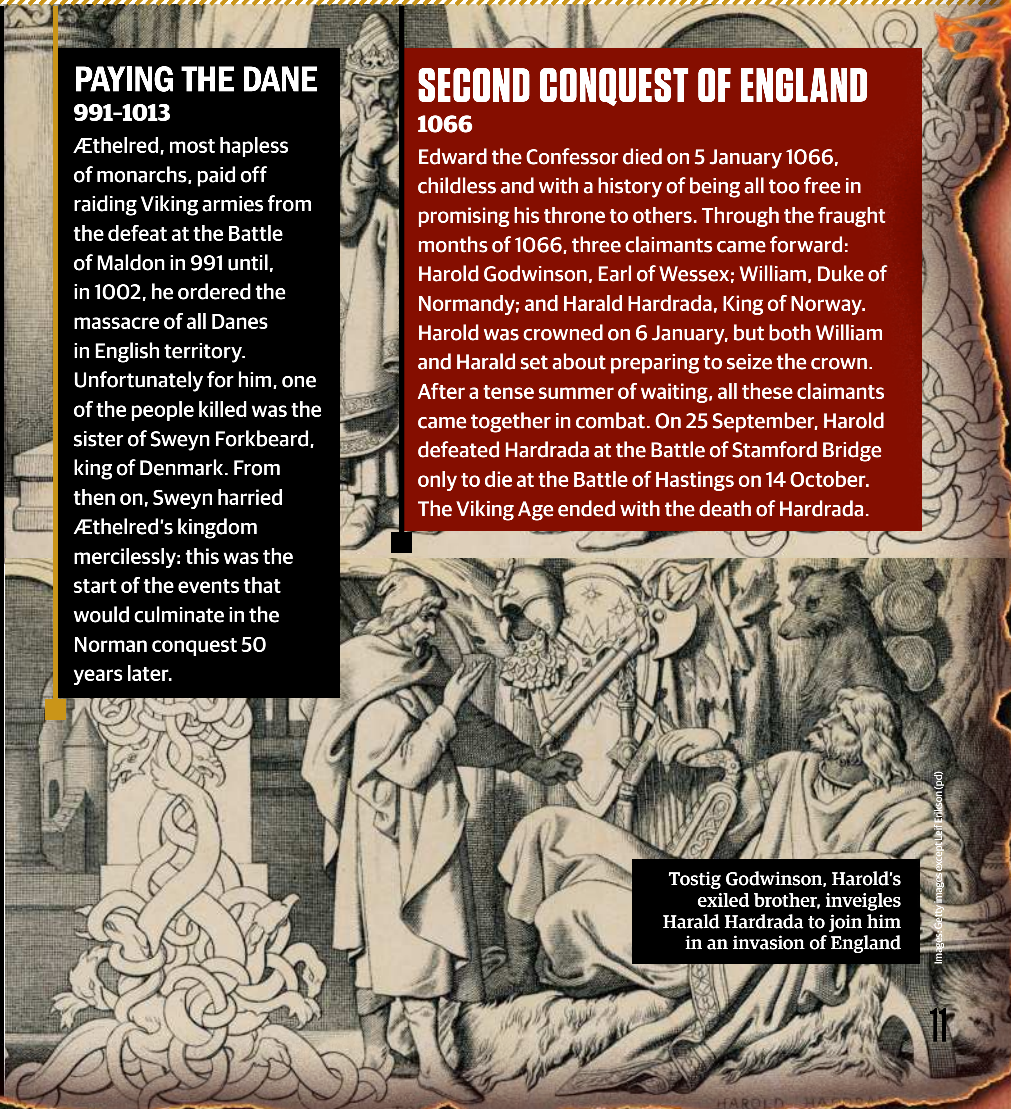
991-1013

Æthelred, most hapless of monarchs, paid off raiding Viking armies from the defeat at the Battle of Maldon in 991 until, in 1002, he ordered the massacre of all Danes in English territory. Unfortunately for him, one of the people killed was the sister of Sweyn Forkbeard, king of Denmark. From then on, Sweyn harried Æthelred's kingdom mercilessly: this was the start of the events that would culminate in the Norman conquest 50 years later.

SECOND CONQUEST OF ENGLAND

1066

Edward the Confessor died on 5 January 1066, childless and with a history of being all too free in promising his throne to others. Through the fraught months of 1066, three claimants came forward: Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex; William, Duke of Normandy; and Harald Hardrada, King of Norway. Harold was crowned on 6 January, but both William and Harald set about preparing to seize the crown. After a tense summer of waiting, all these claimants came together in combat. On 25 September, Harold defeated Hardrada at the Battle of Stamford Bridge only to die at the Battle of Hastings on 14 October. The Viking Age ended with the death of Hardrada.



Tostig Godwinson, Harold's exiled brother, inveigles Harald Hardrada to join him in an invasion of England

Images: Getty images except Leif Erikson (pd)

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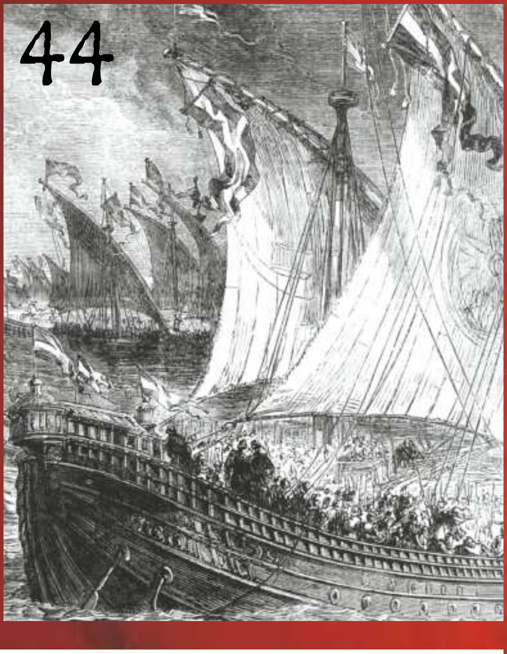
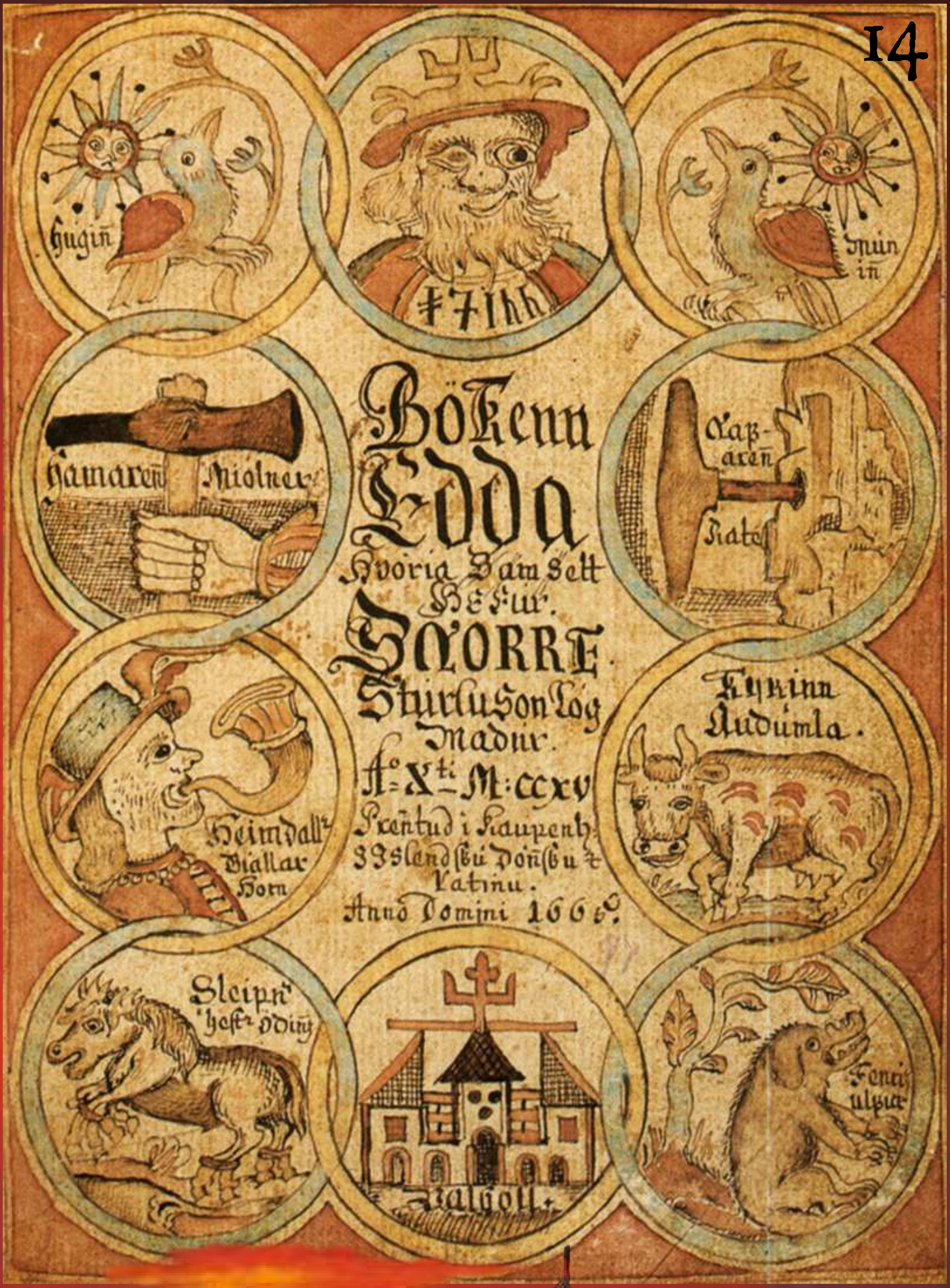
14 Before the North
18 Kingdom of the Northmen
22 Vinland the Good
30 Early Viking Raids on Britain
34 Alfred vs the Vikings
40 The Danelaw
44 The Vikings Return
48 Emperor of the North
56 The Last Viking King
62 Lost Kingdoms of the Vikings




14
Hugin
Muninn
Hamaren Miolner
Nafaren Rate
Bókenn Edda
Snorre Sturluson
Heimdall Giallar Horn
Kyrinn Audumla
Anno Domini 1666.
Sleipnr hestr Odins
Valholl
Fenris ulfur

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Before the North

A key record of Norse myth claims that the Vikings weren't endemic to Scandinavia, but is this archaeological truth or just a good story?

Written by April Madden

In the early 13th century, a man named Snorri Sturluson sat down to write a complete and epic history of his people. He was doing something largely unprecedented: for centuries, the kingdoms and communities of the ancient Norse had recorded their legends and lore orally in great sweeping mythological tales known as sagas. Written language had only really come into use with the rise of the Christian faith, which had begun to spread to the northern lands, and it was still very much the preserve of the monks who had brought it there and the odd secular scholar like Snorri.

The Christians' worldview centred themselves and their faith; by contrast, Nordic Snorri lived in Iceland, the 'Ultima Thule' at the end of the world. To bright, sunny Europe stretched out south and east below him, Iceland was a semi-mythical frozen land of savages, one of the homes of the fur-clad pagan berserkers that made the Western Roman emperor's Varangian Guard so formidable. Even northernmost Britain, with its woad-painted anti-Roman tribes still a close memory at the time, was considered more civilised than that.

Snorri had an unusual level of education for a man who had not taken holy orders. As a result of a family feud during his childhood, he was fostered and educated in the southern Icelandic town of Oddi – a rich cultural centre in the Middle Ages – by clan chieftain Jón Loftsson, who claimed descent from the Norwegian royal family. Snorri became well and widely read in history and theology from around Christendom as well as learning all about the history and culture of his own people. He eventually rose to become the lawspeaker of the Icelandic Althing; an elected role equivalent almost to a modern-day prime minister. In Iceland and the surrounding Nordic realms of Denmark, Sweden, Greenland and particularly Norway, he was seen as an intellectual giant. But to the people of the realms outside his own, particularly the Byzantine sophisticates many Nordic warriors encountered during a well-paid stint in the Varangian Guard, even the polished, knowledgeable Snorri was a

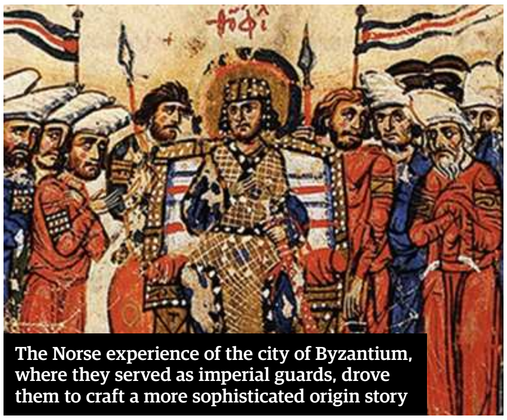
These reconstructed Nordic town houses in Germany are even smaller than rural dwellings of the era. Were the Vikings ashamed of their humble roots?

country bumpkin; a member of a race from so far north even God must have forgotten He had created them. Snorri intended to do something about that.

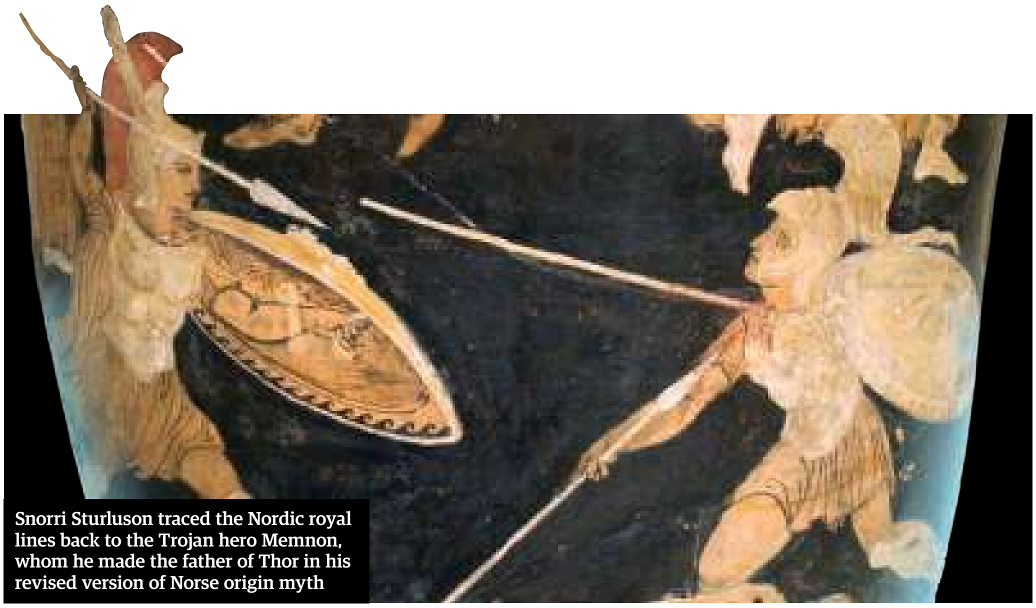
The fireside tales and sagas that informed the Norse worldview were very much centred on the pagan gods of the north. The royal lines of Denmark, Sweden and Norway all claimed descent from mythological figures; most traced their lineage back, in complicated fairytale fashion, to Odin, the one-eyed Allfather and god of knowledge, learning and magic. Rightly surmising that Christian Europe would scoff at such local superstition, Snorri set about redrafting the narrative with a propagandist's eye. He was familiar with the literature of Rome and Britain thanks to the Irish Catholic monks who had inhabited Iceland on and off even before the Norse had settled there, and one particular origin story that was common to both caught his eye: the classical Greek tale of the immediate aftermath of the Trojan War, in which the Trojan prince Aeneas, last surviving male scion of the royal line, escapes the burning wreckage of the city to found a new civilisation. In the Roman poet Virgil's epic *Aeneid* he becomes the ancestor of Roman tyrant Julius Caesar; in English historian Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, a descendant of Aeneas, Brutus, then goes on to become the founder of Britain.

> "Snorri redrafted the narrative with a propagandist's eye"

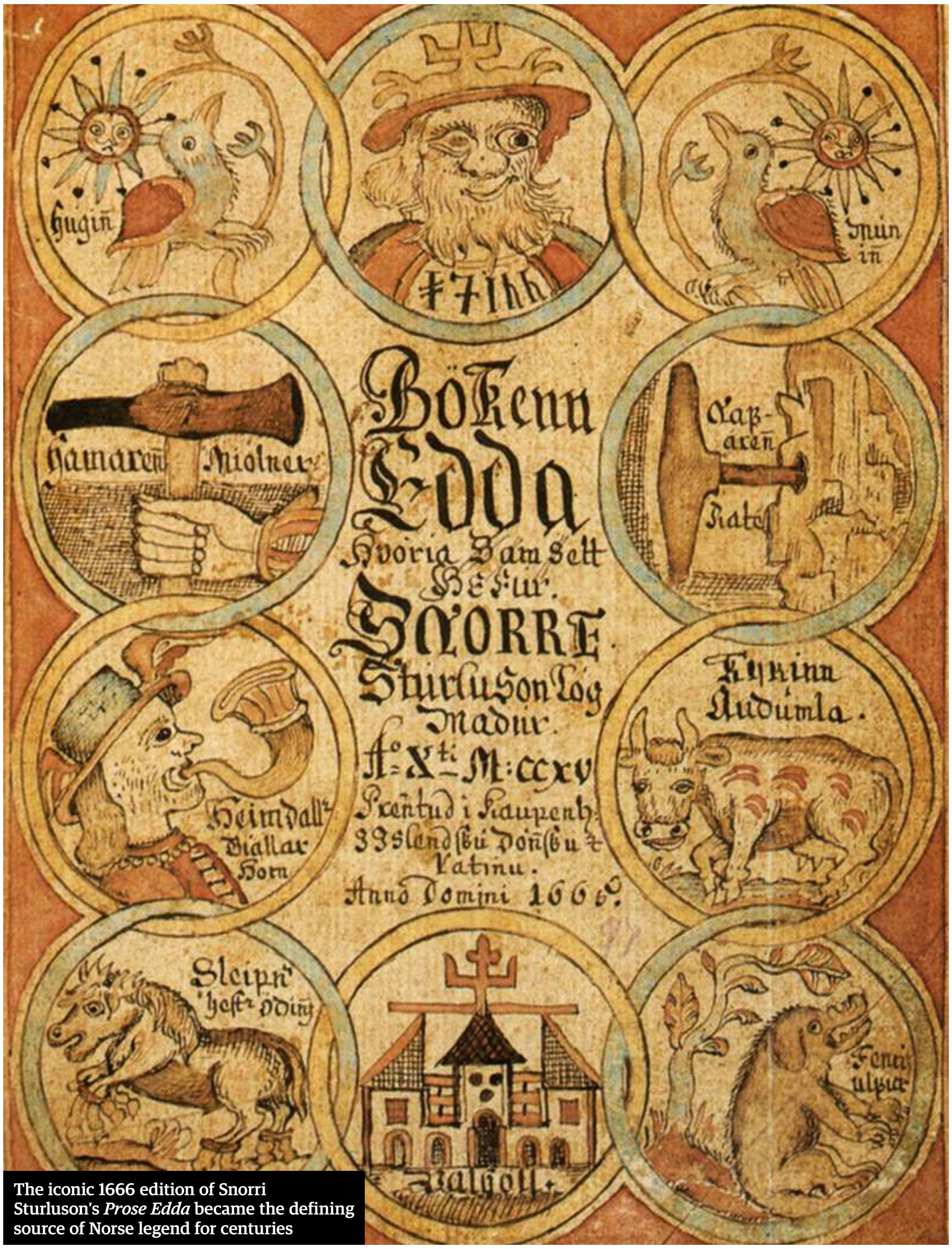
Snorri took the idea and ran with it. In what today comes across as a breathtakingly obvious piece of fan-fiction on Snorri's part, the Norse god Thor is the child of a daughter of King Priam of Troy. He grows into an adventuring hero in the mould of the sagas, marries a golden-haired Sibyl identified as the Norse goddess Sif, and 20 generations later (taking in some pertinent heroes from the sagas and the Nordic royal genealogies) a magically gifted boy named Odin is born. A prophecy tells Odin that "his name would become renowned in the northern part of the world and honoured more than other kings". Odin promptly sets off from Turkey (Snorri was clever enough to root his mythical Troy



The Norse experience of the city of Byzantium, where they served as imperial guards, drove them to craft a more sophisticated origin story

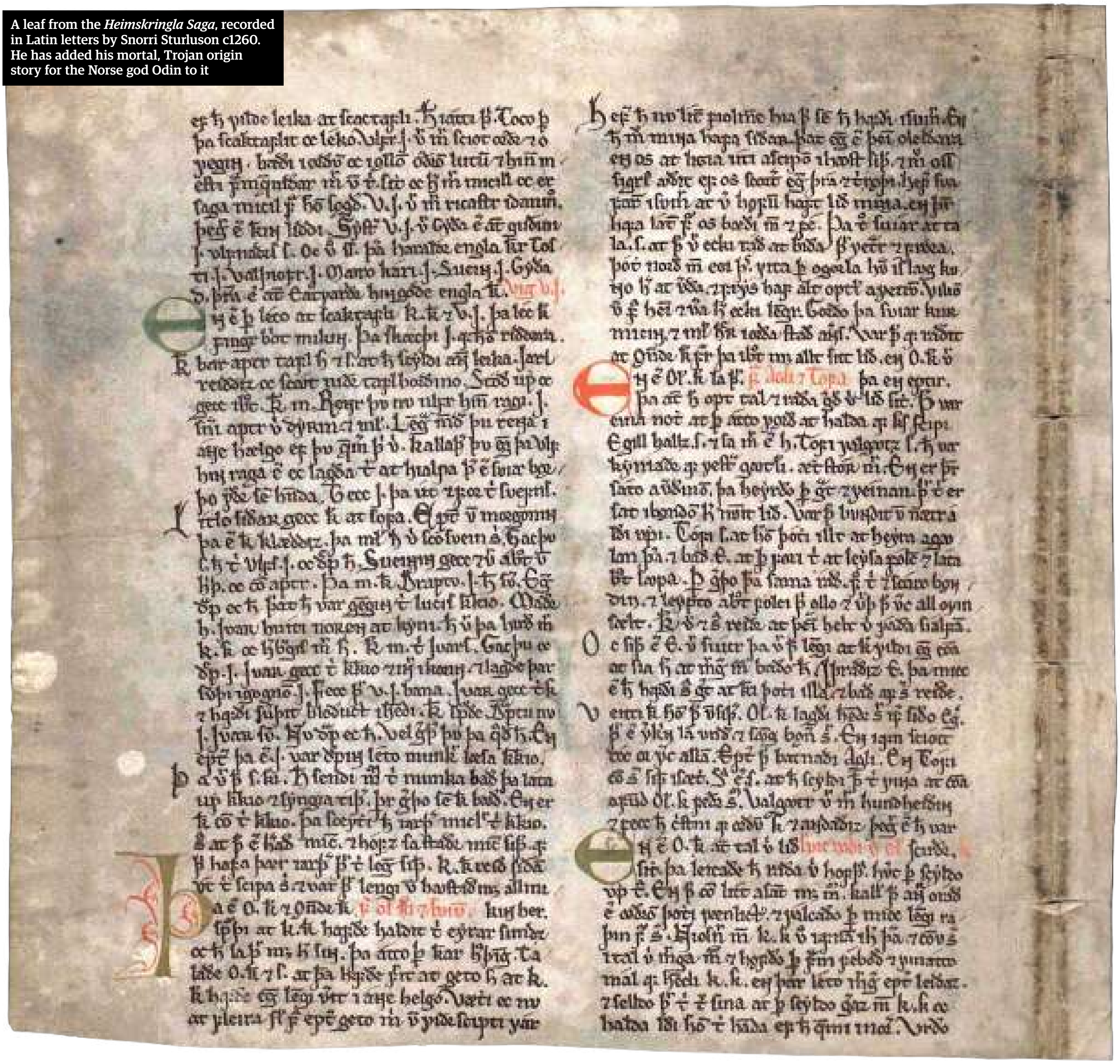


Snorri Sturluson traced the Nordic royal lines back to the Trojan hero Memnon, whom he made the father of Thor in his revised version of Norse origin myth



The iconic 1666 edition of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* became the defining source of Norse legend for centuries

Images: Frank Vincentz CC-BY-SA 3.0 (Nordic town), Rob Koopman CC-BY-SA 3.0 (Snorri Sturluson)



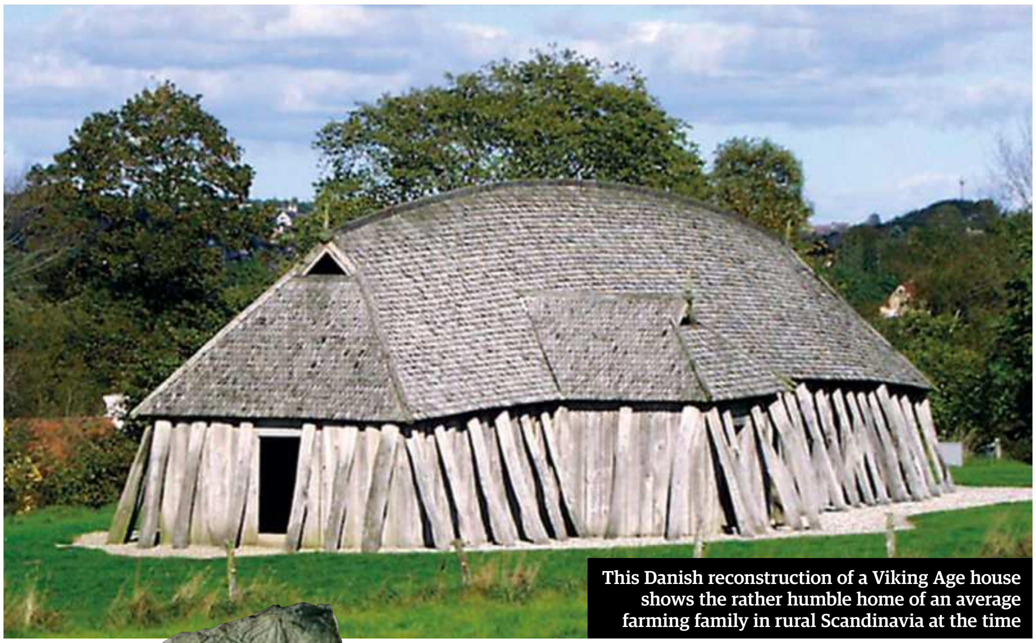
A leaf from the *Heimskringla Saga*, recorded in Latin letters by Snorri Sturluson c1260. He has added his mortal, Trojan origin story for the Norse god Odin to it

in geographical fact) and heads northwest with a retinue of followers.

First they head to Saxland; one of Odin's sons becomes its king. The same story is repeated in Westphalia, then France, then Denmark and Sweden. Finally, on encountering the northern sea, Snorri does a little historical borrowing from Alexander the Great's epic ocean crossing to India and has his Odin end up in Norway. Throughout the story the sophisticated Trojans are mistaken for gods; by the time they reach Scandinavia they have been thoroughly apotheosised. Snorri even claims that the Norse word for the pagan gods, 'aesir', derives from 'Asia', and preserves a folk memory of the civilised people of once-great Troy. He was a highly trained spoken-word poet, and he told a great story. Unfortunately, not a word of it is true.

In actual fact, the peoples who came to be known as the Vikings originated in the last countries Snorri claimed they had visited: Denmark, Sweden and Norway. They were predominantly rural cultures, focused on fishing and subsistence farming, and they largely kept to themselves. In the 8th century something changed dramatically. Bands of raiders began to descend on the coasts of their southern neighbours in hit-and-run attacks for plunder and slaves. Exploratory groups set out down the great rivers of continental Europe seeking trade and even settlements. The people that we now call the Vikings spread out from their rural homesteads and began to discover the vast, wealthy cities of the south. They raided and traded through the British Isles, Europe and Russia, down into modern-day Istanbul (then Byzantium, last great outpost of the Roman Empire, where perhaps they first encountered the dream of Troy), took Iceland and Greenland and even went as far as the eastern coast of modern-day Canada, where they found a tribe so poor and rural even they could look down on them.

What we don't know entirely is why. Many theories have been put forward as to the factors that drove this then little-known group out into the wider world. Their homelands were rocky and ill-suited to farming; a burst of overpopulation could soon tip them from subsistence to famine, as could



This Danish reconstruction of a Viking Age house shows the rather humble home of an average farming family in rural Scandinavia at the time

Viking cultures had previously used their own runic script to record simple inscriptions like this, but only with the use of Latin letters do more intricate mythologies appear in the historical record

Snorri Sturluson invented a whole new Trojan genealogy for Norse creator god Odin in the wake of the Christianisation of Scandinavia

localised climactic events like drought or floods. Their homelands were also susceptible to volcanic winter: with the wind in the right direction an eruption in Iceland could easily and unpredictably decrease sunlight and temperatures in Norway, Denmark and Sweden enough to ruin a summer's crop. What we do know is that when, in the 8th century, the Norse began to go out into the world in droves they brought a lot of its ideas and culture back with them. Before engaging with Christendom, Nordic cultures kept their records in oral histories; their system of writing – runes – was primitive compared to the sophisticated alphabets of the wider world and imbued with more than a slight sense of sorcery that was bound up with the myth of Odin. Runestones marked deaths, adventures and exploration; they weren't used to record the nuances of history. When the Norse encountered, and began to explore, the origin stories of other cultures and other religions and to learn to read and write in the much more pliable and expressive Latin alphabet (with a few unique additions of their own), key motifs and metaphors from those tales and histories became inextricably entwined with theirs.

What this means today is that the Norse were never able to tell us the entire truth of their own history in their own words. The detailed, academic, fanciful history of Snorri is entirely post-Christianity – it starts with the Word and the Flood and all the motifs of the Old Testament – and bullishly apologist. It was clearly written by a man who had heard of, or seen, or experienced, people from more sophisticated societies mocking his own. It's an attempt to elevate his culture and its relationship with world myth to the level of that of distant, dreamt-of Rome or nearby, wealthy England.

Did Snorri try to obfuscate what he thought were Scandinavia's rather peasant origins as it stepped onto the world stage? Or did he truly believe that he had researched, discovered and interpreted a genuine historical narrative that had been lost to the ages? A telling paragraph about Odin's journey through Germany and France cleverly joins up not only the genealogies of the saga heroes with Odin's new Trojan background, but it also makes those particular territories – territories that were at the time under Saxon and Norman, or genetically Norse, command – part of a once-Nordic trail of empire that deftly seems to justify their invasion and conquest.

Whatever the true, probably rather humble origin story of the Vikings was, Snorri demonstrated their unambiguous willingness to move beyond it and to reshape both their history and their destiny in a mould that they preferred.

A statue of Ask and Embla by sculptor Stig Blomberg in Sölvesborg, Sweden

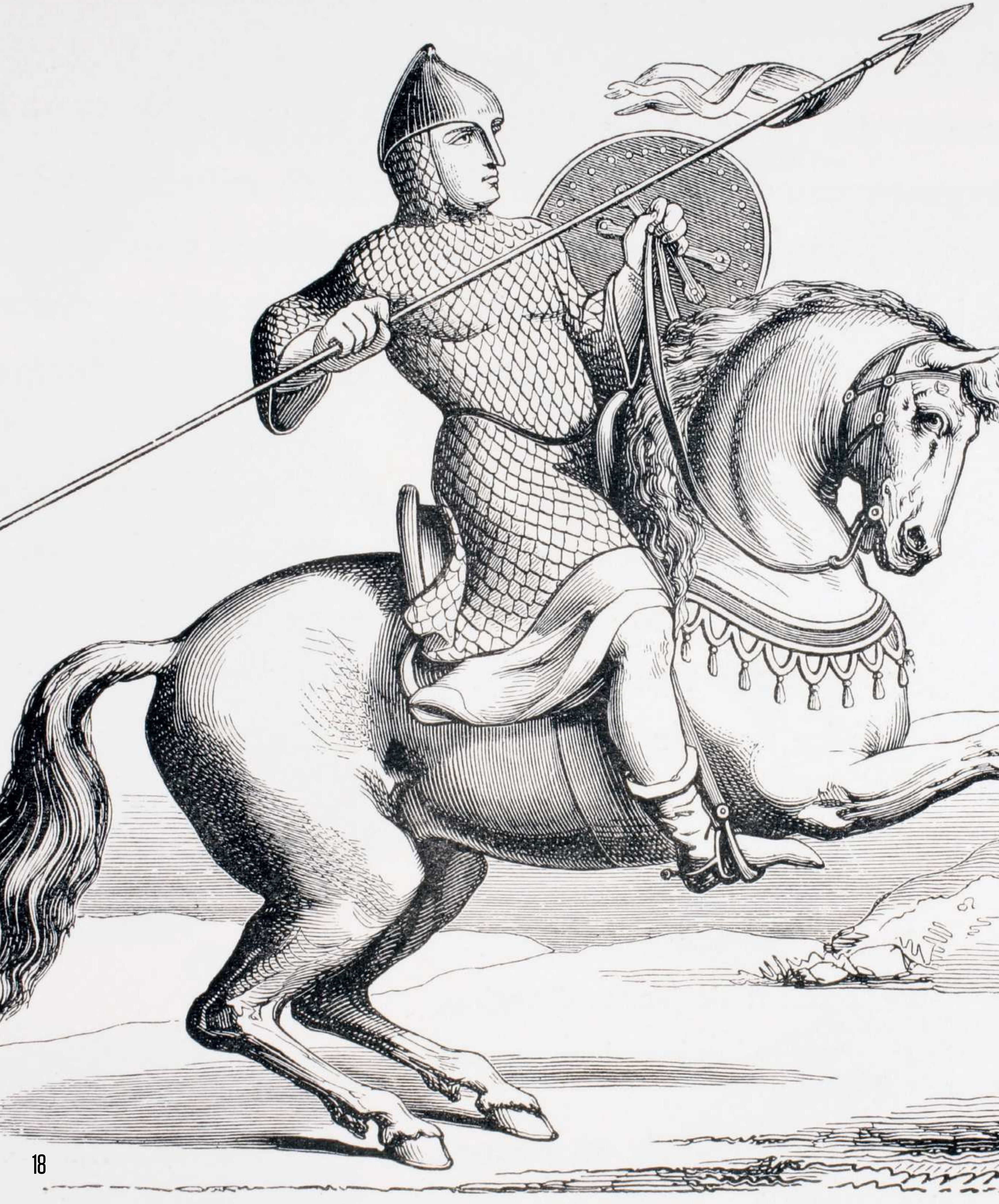
Family trees

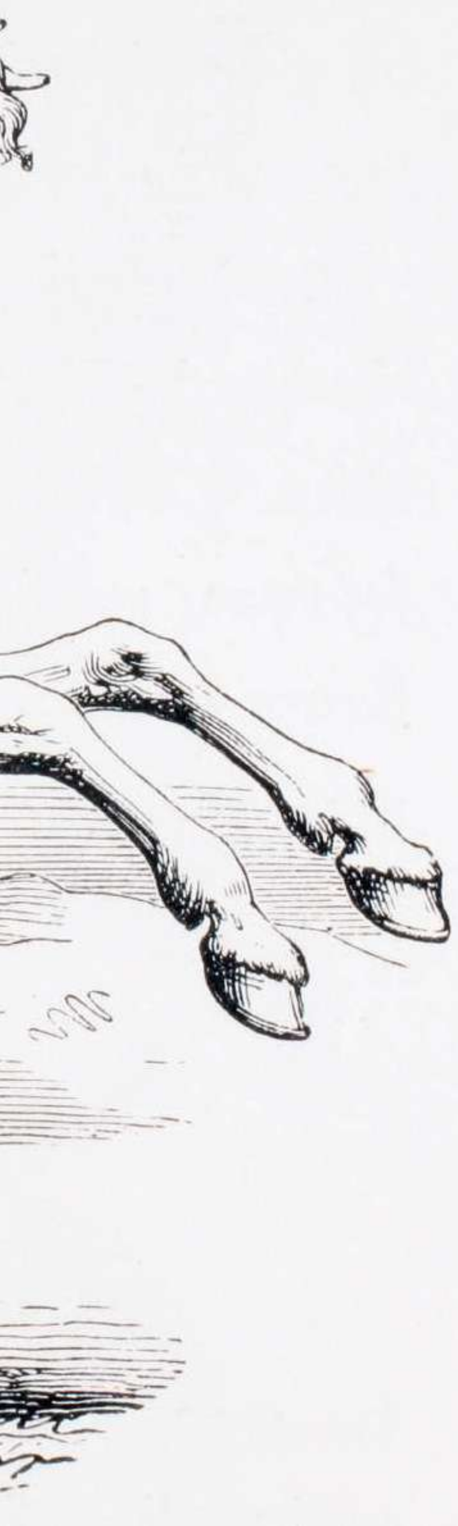
Could a common motif in Proto-Indo-European myth make Snorri Sturluson's origin theory credible after all?

The pre-Christian Norse creation myth was recorded by Snorri as well as other, earlier sources. In it, three of the pagan gods – either Odin and his brothers Vili and Ve, or occasionally Odin, Hœnir and Lóðurr (sometimes thought to be Loki) – are walking on a beach when they encounter two trees. From these they carve the first humans, named Ask and Embla, and each endows them with gifts that together add up to life itself.

The sound of the names and the story itself have familiar echoes for anyone who knows the story of Adam and Eve, but it may not just be a simple post-Christianity retelling of it. Proto-Indo-European myths that seeped into other societies are also strikingly familiar: Persian Zorostrianism has the first humans, Mashya and Mashyana, also carved from trees; Indian Vedic legend has Yama and Yami. What this hints at is a Proto-Indo-European root for the Norse cultures, a link that is often found through mythology and etymology. Perhaps Snorri really was onto something when he used familiar stories and word roots to explain and justify his theory on the origins of the Norse: it's currently thought that the Proto-Indo-Europeans originated from the Anatolian steppes – now the Asian area of modern-day Turkey.

Images: Malene Thyssen (Danish reconstruction), Henrik Sendelbach (statue), Roberto Fortuna (runic script) CC-BY-SA 3.0





Kingdom of the Northmen

How the Vikings turned a small duchy into a great Medieval power

Written by Edoardo Albert

Visit Normandy today and you will find a settled agricultural land dominated by the bocage that caused Allied troops so much difficulty in the weeks after D-Day. But this quiet atmosphere belies the area's turbulent past.

Normandy was fought over for centuries. The area enters recorded history in 53 BCE, when Julius Caesar conquered its Celtic and Belgic inhabitants as part of his campaigns to bring Gaul under Roman control. After vigorous resistance, the local people settled comfortably into Roman rule until the crises of the 3rd century CE brought the first devastating raids by Saxon pirates. After the temporary stabilisation brought about by the emperor Diocletian, the region again fell prey to invading Germanic tribes from the beginning of the 5th century. But by the end of the 5th century, one of these tribes, the Franks, had become dominant under their king, Clovis. The Franks were devout Christians, and their patronage brought the foundation of many monasteries in the area, most famously the tidal island monastery of Mont-Saint-Michel, on which Saint Aubert built the first oratory in 709.

> Charles the Simple gave what would become Normandy to the Viking chieftain Rollo to stop him raiding Frankish lands

However, by the latter part of the 8th century and on into the 9th, what would one day become Normandy came under attack from a fresh wave of pagan raiders: the Vikings. The Carolingian Empire assembled by Charlemagne began to dissolve after his death and the Vikings exploited the political weakness attendant upon civil wars all they could.

Among them was a Northman called Rollo (Hrólfr in Old Norse) of uncertain origin - the extant sources identify him as either Danish or Norwegian, but the difference might have seemed moot to contemporary chroniclers. Rollo, having unsuccesfully laid siege to Paris, set up his base on the estuary of the River Seine near Rouen, from where he raided for a decade. Unable to expel him, Charles the Simple, King of the Franks, hit on the strategy of turning poacher into gamekeeper: officially cede the territory that Rollo had occupied to the Northman, in return for Rollo swearing allegiance to him as king. The two men signed the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte in 911: Rollo was ceded the land from the River Epte to the sea, in exchange for defending the kingdom from Viking raiders.

As part of the treaty, Rollo and his men agreed to convert to Christianity, and Rollo was formally baptised, taking the name Robert and being promised the king's daughter in marriage -

Images Getty Images

'La Merveille'

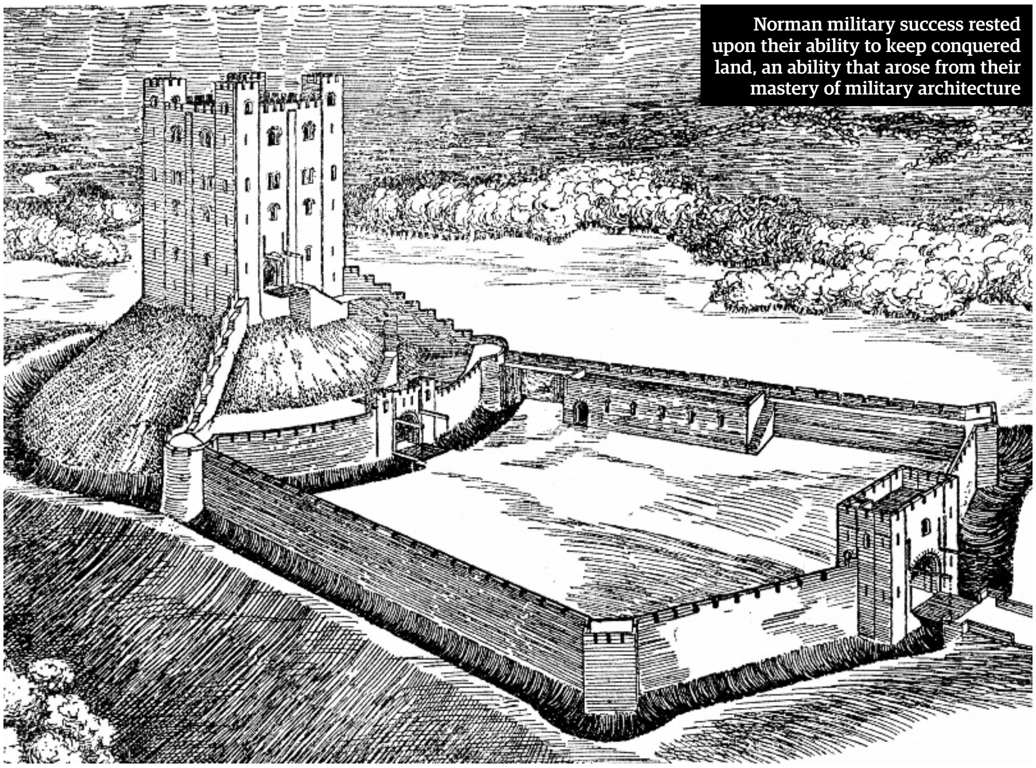
As the power of the dukes of Normandy grew, so did their reliance on the protection of their great patron, Saint Michael. In 1020, Richard the Good, son of Richard the Fearless, commissioned Abbot Hildebert to build a new abbey church upon Mont Saint-Michel. Romanesque architecture was in its infancy, but in their ambition to glorify the archangel, Richard and Hildebert asked extraordinary things of their new church.

The rock of Saint Michel was shaped like a sugar loaf, rising 78.6 metres (258 feet) above sea level. The obvious architectural choice would have been to cut the top off the mountain to create a solid and level foundation for the new church. But that would have been to step down from heaven. Instead, Abbot Hildebert took the apex of the rock for the ground level of his new church, and built out in all directions to provide the foundations.

The apex of the rock is the building's centre, the crossing point where nave and transept meet and join. On this rock, Hildebert built his church, the central tower rising directly from the apex of the mount, supported by the four piers that still hold the tower up, thrusting the statue of Saint Michael (a 19th-century addition) into the sky. Abbot Hildebert and his successors built out westward about 200 feet from the cross of the church.

But the great Medieval church was never properly finished – they were still building 150 years later, when Abbot Robert de Torigny rebuilt the west front with two towers. It was two towers too many. One fell in 1300. Slowly, the west front gave way, so that in 1776 the whole façade and three spans of the nave had to pulled down. Today, only four of the seven original seven spans of the nave survive.

Mont Saint-Michel is sometimes referred to as La Merveille, or the Marvel



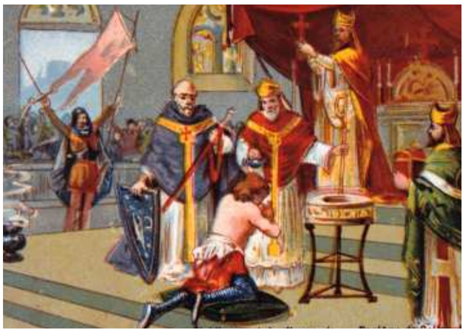
Norman military success rested upon their ability to keep conquered land, an ability that arose from their mastery of military architecture

although whether the marriage was ever finalised is still unclear.

As a sign of his allegiance to Charles, Rollo had to formally place his hands into the hands of the king. To drive home the point that Rollo was the subject of the monarch, the bishops attending proposed that Rollo kiss Charles' foot as well. The Northmen were not at all keen on the idea and came up with a compromise: one of his men would do it on his chief's behalf. But when he stood before the king, he grabbed Charles' foot and hauled it up to his lips, causing the king to fall over. The Normans were to remain a disrespectful thorn in the side of the French monarchy for another three centuries.

The treaty did not preclude Rollo from continuing to act as a Viking chieftain, so long as he did not attack the lands belonging to Charles. As such, in the following decades he expanded the territory under his control until, by his death around 932, it included almost all the land that would become the Duchy of Normandy.

The Viking settlers also acquired a name during this time: Normanz, the plural form of an Old French word (singular Normand, Normant) that meant 'North man' that was itself derived from the Old Norse word Norðmaðr, which in Latin became Normannus or Nortmannus. By derivation, the land they had settled came to be called Normandy.



Defining moment

Vikings on the make

951

What to do about these Northmen? The question tormented all the monarchs of northwestern Europe. With their supremely manoeuvrable longships, the raiders could achieve tactical local superiority in a time when communications and land-based travel were slow. So Charles the Simple, proving himself not so stupid, decided to grant the Viking leader, Rollo, the region north of the River Epte up to the coast, on the understanding that Rollo would prevent other Viking raiding parties sailing up the River Seine to attack Paris. It proved a masterstroke.

Timeline

57-56 BCE

Roaming Romans
Julius Caesar, campaigning to clear his debts and gain glory, attacked north and northwest Gaul over two campaigning seasons, bringing the provinces under the control of the might of Rome.

Late 3rd century

Barbarians at the coast
Raids by ship-borne Saxon and other Germanic tribes caused the building of the Saxon Shore system of forts in an ultimately futile effort to turn back the barbarian tide.

851

Vikings on the river
Having been summer raiders, Viking war bands took to setting up camp over winter in the lower reaches of the Seine estuary, ready for a new season of plunder and slave taking, rather than sailing home again.

1002

Marrying up
Richard the Good, Duke of Normandy, married his sister, Emma, to King Æthelred of England. It was a good match: the sister of a duke marrying a king, and it was the start of the fateful linking of the crown of England to the Duchy of Normandy.

966-996

Consolidation
Richard I, known as the Fearless, expanded feudalism in Normandy, ensuring that his barons were personally loyal to him, and then for the last 30 years of his long reign stabilised the duchy, making it a formidable player among the kingdoms and duchies of Francia.

Along with a new name, the Northmen had become enthusiastic converts to their new religion. Rollo's son, William Longsword, conquered the Cotentin Peninsula in 933, bringing the tidal island of Mont-Saint-Michel under Norman control. The dukes favoured the Benedictine monastery there, and Richard the Good, son to Richard the Fearless, sponsored the building of the Romanesque church on the isle. The complex of buildings on the island became one of the wonders of the Medieval world.

Richard the Good (Richard II) was the first duke of Normandy, his father, grandfather and great-grandfather having taken the lesser title of count of Rouen. Richard also numbered among the many leaders to inflict defeat on King Æthelred of England for, in 1000, the English attacked the Cotentin Peninsula intending to capture Richard to prevent Viking raiders using Normandy as a safe haven. The attack proved a failure, leading Æthelred to put his body on the line in a different way: he contracted a marriage with Richard's sister, Emma, thus fatefully linking the House of Normandy to the English crown.

The Norman dukes had become major players in French politics, their power so great that the dukedom, while nominally subject to the king of France, was virtually an independent state. However, it was plunged into civil strife when Duke Robert the Magnificent died while returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, leaving his eight-year-old illegitimate son as heir. The boy, known as William the Bastard by his many domestic enemies, survived the turmoil of his childhood to become William the Conqueror.

William's conquest of England would, in the end, be the death of the Duchy of Normandy. William's sons disputed the succession, their quarrels being resolved on the battlefield at Tinchebrai in 1106 when Henry I of England defeated his brother, Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy, holding him prisoner for the rest of his life. Thus was also sown the seed of future conflict between England and France: as dukes of Normandy, the successors to Henry I owed fealty to France, but as kings of England they were equals to the monarchs on the other side of the Channel.

The duchy became part of the Angevin Empire when it was conquered by Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou and husband to Empress Matilda, the only surviving child of Henry I of England, in 1144, who then gave it over to his son, the future Henry II of England and the country's first Plantagenet king. The Plantagenet kings of England and the Capetian kings of France became locked into a decades-long struggle for power. At one point, the Angevins controlled half of France as well as England, but as dukes of Normandy, they remained vassals of the French king. Angevin power waxed under Henry II and Richard I, but fell apart when John took the throne and proceeded to acquire the nickname Lackland, as King Philip II gradually whittled away at the Plantagenet territory, finally winning a victory at the Battle of Bouvines on 27 July 1214. Normandy was now a duchy in the gift of the king of France, and the kings had no interest in returning it.

In 1259, Henry III of England, signed the Treaty of Paris, formally acknowledging that he no longer had a claim. The loss rankled deeply with the English monarchs, becoming one of the justifications for the Hundred Years' War, during which the duchy was reconquered early in the 15th century, only to be lost in 1450 following the Battle of Formigny.

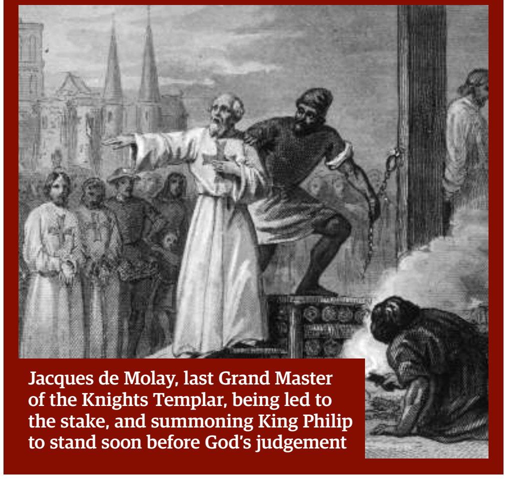
The Normans were to remain a disrespectful thorn in the side of the French monarchy for another three centuries

Independent Normandy

Although the French crown reconquered Normandy early in the 13th century, the duchy had been, to all intents and purposes, independent of France for 300 years. During that time, a body of local laws, privileges and rights had grown up that the Normans were reluctant to cede to the French kings, with their predilection for centralising everything under their increasingly authoritarian rule.

Tensions grew, and riots flared up against the rule of Philip the Fair, the French king who suppressed the Knights Templar on trumped-up charges of heresy. In an effort to protect their ancient rights, the Norman barons presented to Philip's heir, Louis X, a charter that sought to preserve them. Louis, in a weak position at the start of his reign, had little choice but to sign, thus guaranteeing, in principle at least, that the monarch could not impose a new tax upon the Normans without their consent, that the rulings of the chief Norman court at Rouen were final and could not be overturned by royal courts, and that the king would forswear arbitrary acts and punishments.

While granted at a time when royal authority was weakened, the French kings soon moved against the Norman charter, eventually reducing the duchy to a royal appanage. Normandy was simply too close to Paris and the centres of power to be allowed its independence.



Jacques de Molay, last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, being led to the stake, and summoning King Philip to stand soon before God's judgement

Defining moment

The Conquest 1066

England had been conquered before, by the Romans, and then the Danes in 1015, but the conquest by William in 1066 was pivotal. It replaced almost all the upper echelons of Anglo-Saxon society with Norman, Breton and French lords, leading to us having names like Robert and Richard rather than Ælfweard and Eadwig, and turned the sociopolitical orientation of England southwards. Before, the most significant links were eastward across the North Sea to Scandinavia, now they were south to the other side of the Channel.

Defining moment

Battle of Bouvines

27 July 1214

Alarmed by the conquests of Philip II, a coalition assembled, including King John of England, Holy Roman Emperor Otto IV and the count of Flanders. Although John was not present at the battle, his hopes of restoring the Angevin Empire rested upon the defeat of Philip II. The French charged repeatedly, winning a decisive victory. With no hope of regaining his lands in France, King John had little option but to sign the charter his barons brought him a year later, the Magna Carta.

28 September 1106

Battle of Tinchebrai

Robert Curthose, William's eldest son, was bequeathed the Duchy of Normandy on his father's death. Rivalry between the sons of William led, finally, to Henry, by 1100 king of England, invading Normandy and defeating his brother in battle. Robert spent the rest of his life, 28 years, as a prisoner.

1144

Normandy conquered

In 1128, Geoffrey, count of Anjou and a traditional Norman enemy, married Matilda, daughter of Henry I and his only surviving child. Anarchy followed when Stephen of Blois was declared king of England and duke of Normandy. Geoffrey responded by invading and conquering Normandy.

18 May 1152

Angevin Empire

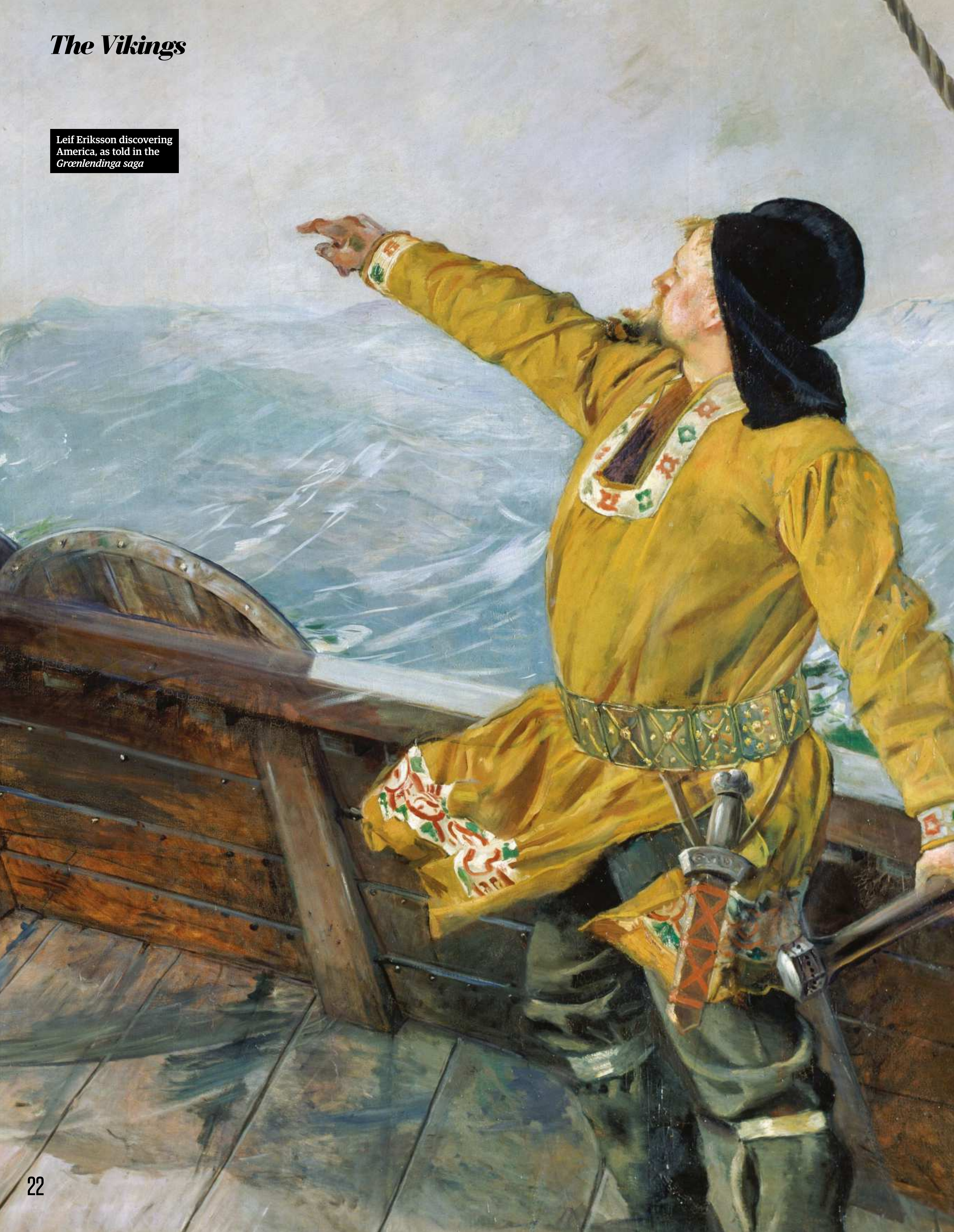
Henry II, king of England and duke of Normandy, married Eleanor of Aquitaine, bringing England, Normandy, most of Wales, much of Ireland and the western half of France under his control in what would be called the Angevin Empire.

1202-1204

France conquers Normandy

During a two-year campaign, Philip II, king of France, defeated King John of England – a defeat brought about in large part through John's ill treatment of his local allies – and by August 1204 Philip had conquered Normandy.

Images: Getty Images, David Brossard CC BY-SA 2.0 (Mont-Saint-Michel)



Leif Eriksson discovering America, as told in the *Grœnlendinga saga*

C. KROHG
1893

Vinland the Good

Hundreds of years before Columbus, the Norse were the first Europeans in North America

Written by Ben Gazur

The famed longships of the Norse were perfectly designed to skim the rough seas of the North Atlantic. On board could be a band of warriors bent on conquest or a community ready to settle some newly discovered land. Having colonised Iceland in the 9th century, it was only a matter of time before the Norse ships strayed even further westward. In the *Grœnlendinga saga*, we have the Norse account of expeditions into North America.

Erik the Red and Greenland

When charges of manslaughter were brought against Erik the Red and his father, Thorvald, the pair fled their home in Norway. Crossing the sea, they joined those Norse who had already settled in the aptly, if uninvitingly, named Iceland. Here Thorvald died, while Erik married and raised his sons, Leif, Thorvald and Thorstein, and his daughter, Freydis, who would all play such important roles in the Norse voyages into the West.

Erik's violent past was not left behind in Norway. After killing Eyiulf the Foul and the famed dueller Hrafn, Erik and his family had to move on again. A change of scenery did not end the quarrels. A fight over a loaned set of wooden beams erupted between Erik and a man named Thorgest. Others took sides in the dispute, and battles and bloodshed resulted. A meeting of the people in the area declared Erik an outlaw. Clearly, he needed a new home again.

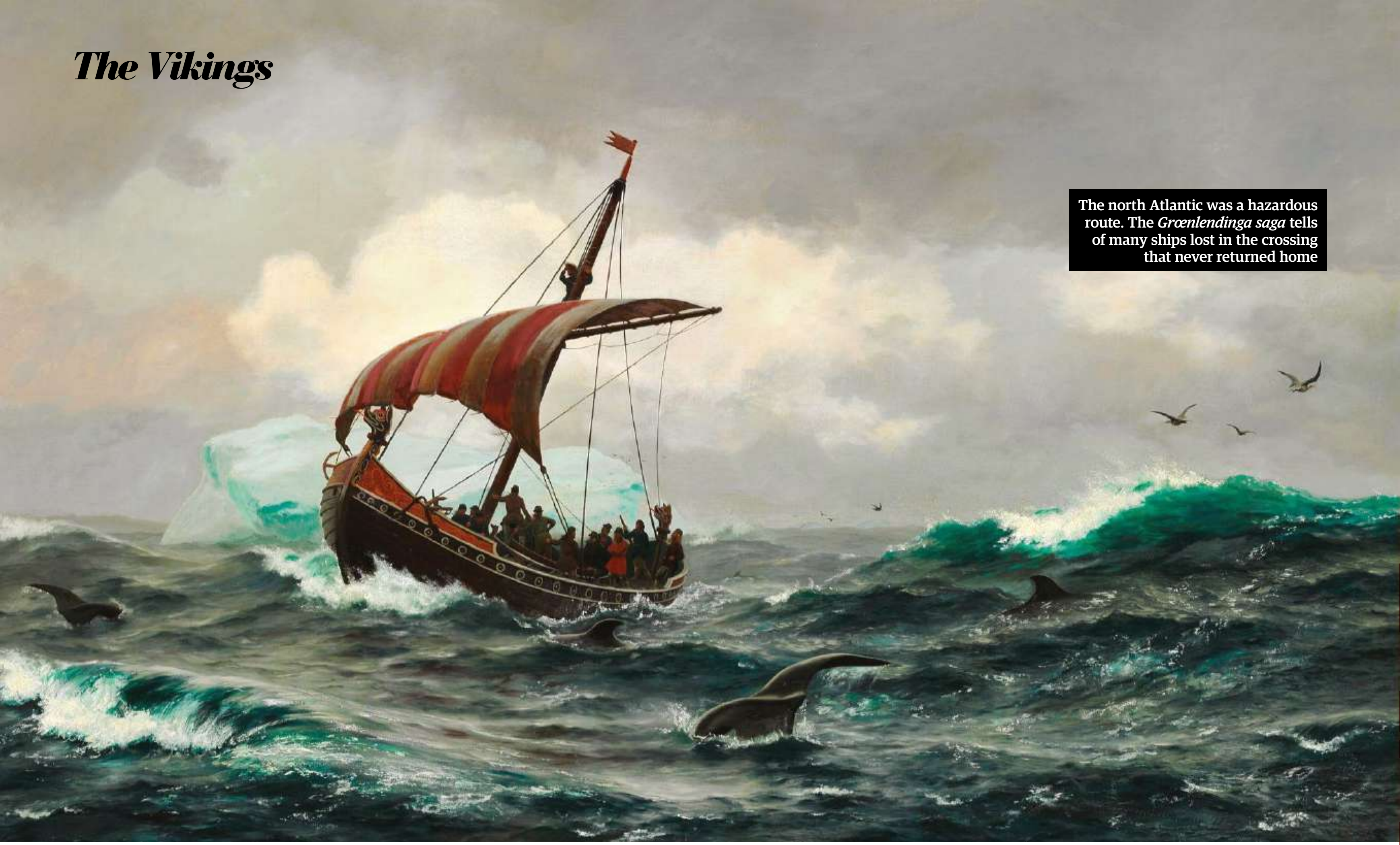
Word had reached Erik of a land beyond the western sea so he equipped a ship for a voyage and gathered a crew for this chancy trip. To his friends he promised that he would return if he succeeded in discovering this land below the horizon. He left it unspoken as to what fate would befall his crew on the ocean if he failed to locate it.

From Iceland, Erik struck land quickly and he named the spot Blacksark. A vast wilderness of rock and towering mountains of ice seemed to loom over this new country. Glaciers spilled down into the churning ocean. In the summers Erik led his crew on expeditions to locate sites for settlements. In the winters, they dug in to survive the biting cold. After three years, Erik sailed once more for Iceland to tell people of his discoveries. When he told the tales of his voyage he named his newfound land of ice and stone Greenland - saying that a country with a good name would be more attractive. The next summer Erik returned to his Greenland, trailed by another 35 ships. Only 14 made it safely to their new home.

While his father was colonising Greenland, Leif sailed back to Norway. He visited King Olaf and this Christian monarch preached the new faith to Leif. Leif was taken with Christianity and, along with his crew, was baptised before returning west in search of his father.

Bjarni's voyage west

While still a young man, Bjarni, a relative of one of the first settlers in Iceland, was filled with a desire to travel. He grew rich by plying his trading vessel between Norse settlements. Every other year he would set his sails for home, however, and spend a winter with his father, Herjólf. One winter, Herjólf decided to follow Erik to Greenland and the old man sold his farm. Among his crew was a Christian from the Hebrides who had composed a famous song about the dangers of the stormy sea and rolling waves that would face them. His song called on the Christian God to watch over the ship. Perhaps his song was heeded by the new god for despite the dangers of the voyage, the ship reached Greenland safely, and Herjólf settled there.



The north Atlantic was a hazardous route. The *Grœnlendinga saga* tells of many ships lost in the crossing that never returned home

> "For many days and nights they had no notion of where they were going"

After a trading voyage that winter, Bjarni returned to Iceland to hear the news that his father had left Norway for Greenland. Perplexed, he decided to keep to his custom of spending the season with his father and turned his ship towards the west. Bjarni asked if his crew would follow him and not a man left his service despite Bjarni warning: "Our voyage must be regarded as foolhardy, seeing that not one of us has ever been in the Greenland Sea."

They soon discovered how foolhardy they had been when all of the dangers listed in the Christian's song were visited on them. For three days they sailed until the land they had left behind was hidden by the water. The good wind that had eased them across the waves fell and a terrible north wind started to blow. A fog descended that hid the sky from them. For many days and nights they had no notion of where they were going. When the Sun once again showed its face, they could navigate and hoisted their sails. On the first sight of land, they sailed straight for it.

"Is this Greenland?" the crew asked Bjarni. He did not believe so, so they sailed on. The next land they found was green and pleasant with hills and woods. "Is this Greenland?" No, replied Bjarni again for there were no great and ice-bound mountains. The third land they discovered was covered with trees in a flat expanse. Once again Bjarni did not think it was Greenland and denied his crew the chance to land there to take on food and supplies. At this his shipmates grumbled but they sailed on anyway.

The next land was a mass of rock and ice, which raised the crew's hopes of an end of their voyages but proved to be only an island in the great sea. Through gales, Bjarni commanded his ship onwards. Finally they found a land that seemed to match the descriptions of Greenland that had come to them. The ship made for land. On the spit of land above their landing spot they discovered the home of Bjarni's father. Bjarni decided to give up voyaging and lived there with his father for the rest of the old man's days.

Leif sets forth

Word of Bjarni's haphazard voyages into the further west spread. Hearing of the lack of spirit Bjarni had shown in not exploring these new lands, people mocked him, but others took up the challenge of following his course through. Leif, son of Erik the Red, travelled to visit Bjarni to hear of his travels, and bought a ship from him.

Leif tried to persuade his father to join him on this new great exploration. At first Erik refused, feeling himself too old for the rigours of the long voyage. Salt spray and foaming ocean swells were thought more suitable for the young. Leif told him they could use his good luck on such a daring mission and succeeded in luring his father to the ship with praise of his skills. On the way, the horse Erik was riding stumbled and threw the old man. Erik took this for a divine sign that he had gone too far. No more lands were to be his for the taking and Erik returned to his home. Leif set sail for the lands beyond the west without him.

First the ship came to the island Bjarni had discovered that was nothing but a flat and rocky outcrop dominated by mountains of ice. No grass grew and all the necessities of life seemed absent. Leif called this Helluland, for it seemed to be nothing but flat rocks ('Hella' in Old Norse). They could not settle here and so Leif set out on his ship again.

The next land they found was flat and wooded, with broad and safe beaches of sand. Leif declared this land too would have a fitting name and called it Markland ('Forest Land'). They set out from this more promising land in hopes of greater discoveries.

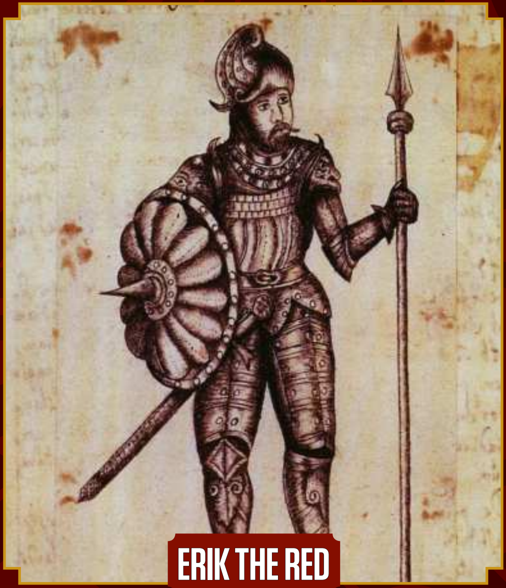
For two days and nights they travelled with a northwesterly wind in their sails. They landed on an island a short distance from a greater land. In the fine weather they explored the island. Seeing the dew on the lush grass, they tasted it and found it the sweetest water in all the world. Taking their ship to the land across the narrow gulf, the tide fell and the ship was grounded on a sandbank. Despite the dangers, they abandoned the ship in a small boat and crossed to the mainland. They discovered rich rivers and lakes in an abundant land. As the tide lifted the ship again, they rowed out and took the vessel up one of the rivers into a lake for safety.

The vines of Vinland

Once ashore, the crew decided to build a long house there. The nearby rivers teemed with the largest salmon any of them had seen and as winter drew in, the grass barely withered. There would be no need to supply cattle with fodder. Even in the depth of winter, the nights were nowhere near as long as

New World Explorers

The people who set out in search of the new western lands

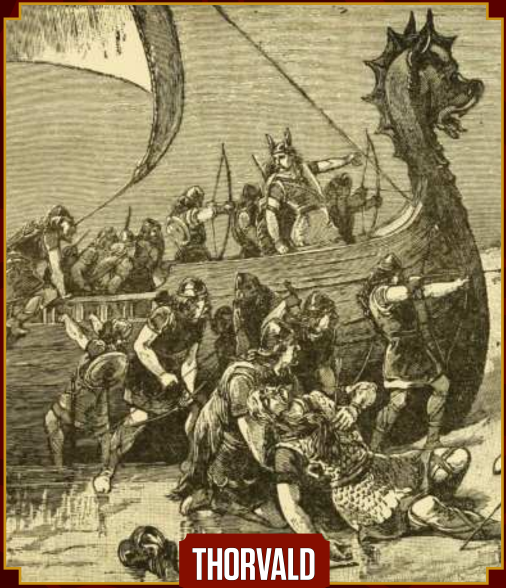


ERIK THE RED

Founder of the first Norse settlement in Greenland, Erik was exiled from both Norway and Iceland for his combative nature. He is also in *Eiríks saga rauða*, which deals with his settling of Greenland. Erik ended his life as paramount chieftain of Greenland, wealthy and respected. He was the father of several of the explorers who visited North America.

LEIF THE LUCKY

The son of Erik the Red, Leif was the first Norse captain to explore North America. He became a Christian at the court of the Norwegian king and preached the new religion in Greenland. His father did not convert, although his mother did build a church. Leif's explorations of what he named Vinland led other Norse explorers to follow him into the west.



THORVALD

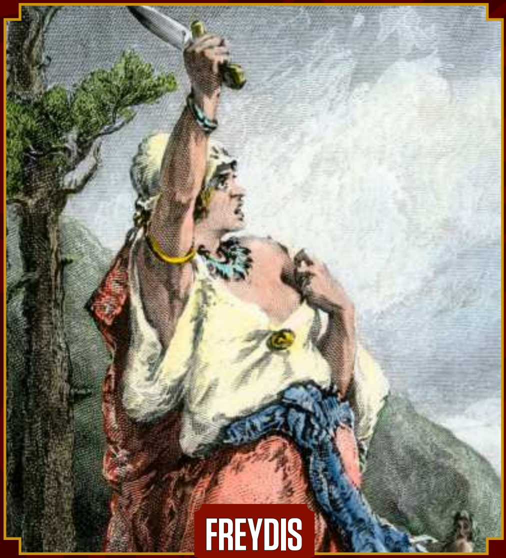
Brother of Leif, Thorvald led an expedition to Vinland that led to the first Norse encounter with the native peoples of North America. However, first contact led to violence and Thorvald was killed in a sea battle. Buried in Vinland, one of the aims of later voyages was to recover his body as Christians felt it was important that he be laid to rest in consecrated ground.

THORFINN KARLSEFNI

A founder of the first Norse settlement in North America, Thorfinn had been born into the elite of Icelandic society and he became a wealthy trader. He used his position and money to fund a voyage to Vinland, where his colony lasted for three years before Vinland was abandoned. Towards the end of his life, he retired to his estates on Iceland.

GUDRID

An early colonist in Greenland, Gudrid was one of the most travelled women of the Norse age. She accompanied her husband Karlsefni to the Vinland colony where she bore him a son - Snorri, the first European born in North America. After Karlsefni's death, Gudrid converted to Christianity and went on a pilgrimage to Rome. On her return to Iceland, she became a nun.



FREYDIS

Daughter of Erik the Red, the *Grœnlendinga saga* offers a very unflattering portrait of her. When attacked by Skraelings the men fled, but a pregnant Freydis exposed her breast and beat against it with her sword while yelling a war cry that drove the Skraelings back to their boats. The negative portrayal of her may be due to her unwillingness to convert to Christianity.

those in Greenland or Iceland. The longer days shone on a land that had no frost.

Leif split the company in half. One group would stay and guard the house while the other would explore the land they had discovered. On no account were the explorers to stay away overnight.

One night it was found that Tyrker the German had not returned with the foragers. This Tyrker was a loyal friend of Leif and Erik the Red, and Leif was angered that he should be lost in this strange land. With 12 men he set out to recover his friend. Only a short distance from the settlement they discovered Tyrker in a state of bewildered excitement. He babbled to the men in German and could not be understood. Rolling his eyes and grinning madly, Tyrker began to explain his discoveries in the Old Norse tongue. Having gone only a little further than the others, he stumbled on something new. "I have found vines and grapes," he told them. Tyrker swore that his homeland was famed for its grapes and that he knew what he was talking about. Despite grapes not being native to North America, there was presumably some delicious berry there that produced a sufficiently intoxicating drink when fermented.

It was from this discovery of vines that it is said that Leif named the new land Vinland. Leif now set his crew to cutting timber and collecting fruit. The cargo was loaded on the ship in the spring and they set out into the rising sun for home.

Leif the Lucky

With fair winds and a calm sea, the ship made its way swiftly back to Greenland. Within the sight of the ice mountains and valleys of their destination the crew called to their captain: "Why are you steering so much into the wind?" Leif had been turning the ship for some time. He asked if anyone could see anything out on the waves. None of the crew could, but then none of the crew could match Leif's hawk-like vision. "I see a ship or raft," Leif told them and pointed. Now they saw it too and the ship steered ever closer. "If they need help we will give it, and if they seek a fight we will be better prepared." On the ship they discovered a party in need of help.

When Thori, leader of those in the ship, heard Leif's name, he asked whether he was son of the famous Erik the Red. Leif said that he was and invited them onto his ships, with as many of their possessions as it could hold. For this rescue of those lost in the midst of the sea he became known as Leif the Lucky. Leif took Thori and his wife Gudrid into his own home.

That winter illness struck the settlers and Thori died, as did Erik the Red. While Leif had no plans to return to Vinland, his brother, Thorvald, felt there was more exploring to do. He borrowed his brother's ship and set out.

Thorvald's voyage

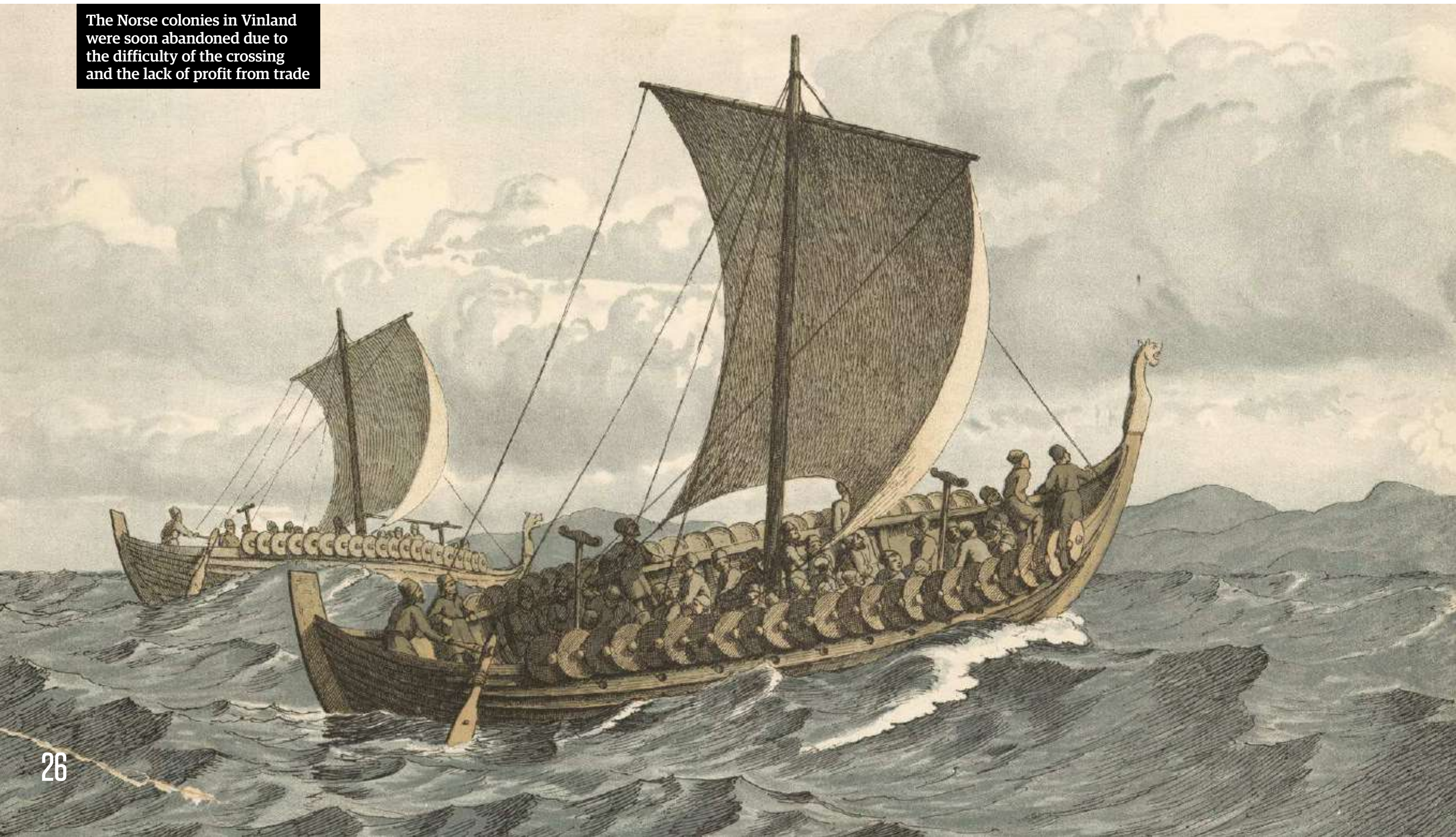
Following Leif's advice, Thorvald made for the place his brother had previously settled. Over winter, Thorvald and his 30 men took in provisions from the rich lands around them. When spring arrived, he loaded a smaller boat to explore the western coast during the summer.

The land they found was wooded and welcoming. The forests came down close to the sea and the beaches were of soft and pale sand. The islands and rivers offered many places to explore. Despite their searches, they found no animal lairs or signs of human habitation until they came to one of the western islands. There they found a wooden structure clearly set up to hold grain and keep it safe. Finding nothing else, Thorvald returned to the Norse settlement in the autumn.

The next summer they explored the eastern coast. As they crossed the sea, a high wind pushed them onto the rocks and damaged the keel of the ship. Putting ashore, they repaired the keel and Thorvald named the place Keelness. Sailing on after the mending, they came to a place of safe anchorage. The land there about was fair and fine. Thorvald looked at it and declared that this was where he would make his home.

Returning to the ship, the men stopped. There on the sand they saw three small mounds that had not been there before. Approaching, they could make out three canoes made of skin, each concealing three men underneath. These men they called Skraelings. The party divided into three to approach them. All but one of the hiding men were captured. The eight that they had seized they killed on the spot, but

> "The eight that they had seized they killed on the spot, but the ninth escaped"



The Norse colonies in Vinland were soon abandoned due to the difficulty of the crossing and the lack of profit from trade

Vinlanda Insula
Mare Oceanum
Thule ultima
Tartarorum
Sinus Ethiopicus

The Vinland Map is allegedly a 15th-century copy of a 13th-century original, but its historicity is questioned

> "There on the sand they saw three small mounds that had not been there before"

the ninth escaped into the woods. Returning to the headland, they looked about and in the distance discerned villages.

Then, as if placed under a powerful charm, the Norsemen were overcome by a sudden need to sleep. Only a voice booming out of the sky was able to call them back. "Awake, Thorvald, thou and all thy company, if thou wouldst save thy life; and board thy ship with all thy men, and sail with all speed from the land!" This the Norsemen did but even as they made it to their ship, innumerable canoes filled the sea. Thorvald called for the ship to put up its war-boards, shields to protect his men from arrows. Putting his faith in his ship's defences Thorvald offered no attack but let the arrows of the Skraelings clatter harmlessly against them. The Skraelings gave up the battle and retreated.

Thorvald called to his men to see if any had been wounded. None had taken so much as a scratch but the captain had not been so lucky himself. He showed his crew the shaft of an arrow, which had glanced through the war-boards and taken him under the arm. Knowing that his end would come soon, Thorvald ordered his men to flee as quickly as possible back to their own settlement. He only asked them to bury him at the point that he had thought would make a good home for his old age. "Bury me there," he told them, "and place a cross at my head, and another at my feet, and call it Crossness for the rest of time."

At the settlement, they gathered a cargo of wood and grapes before sailing back to Greenland, bringing with them the tale of Thorvald's discoveries and of his death.

The death of Thorstein

On Greenland, while Thorvald had been exploring, his brother Thorstein Eriksson had married Gudrid, one of those Leif the Lucky had rescued at sea. When Thorstein heard of his brother's death, he wanted to sail to Vinland and recover his body. He crewed Thorvald's own ship with 25 sturdy men and set out to the west. His wife Gudrid accompanied him.

For a whole summer it is said that their ship was buffeted by the sea and gales, so that they never knew where they were. By winter, they had reached the western settlement of Greenland and sheltered there. Homes were found for of all the crew except for Thorstein and Gudrid, who instead had to shelter on their ship. Shivering on the wooden deck, they were visited by a grim looking man. "I am called Thorstein the Swarthy," he announced to Gudrid and Thorstein Eriksson. The swarthy man offered them a house to live in and Thorstein Eriksson and Gudrid gladly accepted the offer.

But death came among the settlers in that season. Many of Thorstein Eriksson's band sickened and died. Thorstein had coffins made for the dead and carried them back to his ship so that the bodies could be returned to their family. Then the disease entered Thorstein the Swarthy's home, carrying off his wife. As Thorstein the Swarthy's wife Grimhild lay dead on her bed, she seemed to move. The house moaned as if all the timbers of the building shifted and groaned against each other. Thorstein Eriksson sickened after this strange sign. Gudrid did all she could to comfort her husband, yet he died. As she grieved over her husband's body, Thorvald the Swarthy sought to ease her suffering. He promised to accompany Gudrid home and carry with them all the bodies of the dead.

Then the dead man sat up and spoke loudly. "Where is Gudrid?" he asked three times. Gudrid did not know whether to answer the corpse so Thorvald the Swarthy asked, "What do you want?"

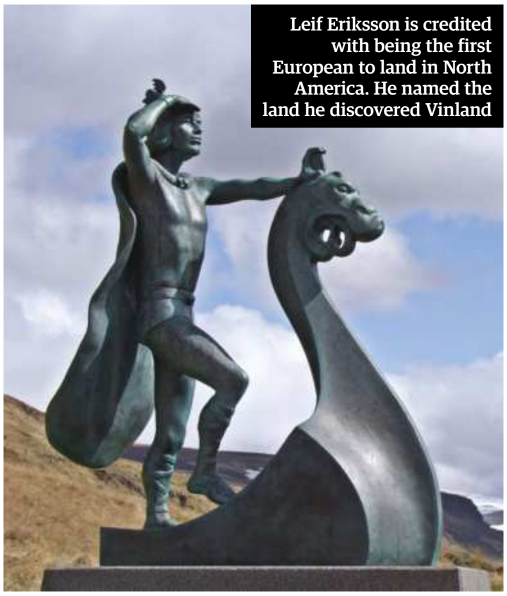
"I wish to tell Gudrid of the fate which is in store for her, so that my death may not sadden her too harshly, for I am at peace in a glorious place. I must tell you, Gudrid, that you will marry a man of Iceland, that many years of happy marriage shall be yours, and from you shall spring a large and famous progeny full of noble virtues. You shall travel the world – from Iceland to the far south before returning to take the veil in a church." Having prophesied the future with his dead tongue, Thorvald Eriksson returned to his bed.

Thorvald the Swarthy sold up his farm and possessions. He attended to Gudrid on her return to her home and returned the bodies of the dead to their families.

Karlsefni's travels

The same summer that had seen Gudrid return saw a ship arrive in Greenland from Norway, captained by Thorfinn Karlsefni. This wealthy captain was welcomed into Leif the Lucky's home and passed the winter there. Karlsefni soon found himself in love with the widow Gudrid and could not resist proposing marriage between them. At the time there was much talk of another voyage to Vinland. People clamoured for Karselfni to lead the expedition and he accepted. With 60 men and five women who were all promised an equal share of the profits of the journey, Karlsefni and Gudrid set out. Since it was their intention to found a permanent settlement in Vinland, they loaded many cattle onto their ships too. Leif loaned them the use of the long house he had constructed in Vinland for the duration of their trip, though he would not give it over to them forever.

The ships soon found the site of Leif's expedition. A huge whale was driven onto the sand where they



Leif Eriksson is credited with being the first European to land in North America. He named the land he discovered Vinland

The only record of the voyage

There's just one source for this saga

The *Grœnlendinga saga* comes down to us in a single manuscript written in the late 14th century called the *Flateyjarbók*. A fire, flood or the nibbling of rats might have deprived us of one of the only written sources that describes the Norse exploration of North America. Most experts place the composition of the saga in the 12th or 13th century, at least a century after the events described, but much of it has proved historically reliable, if liberally sprinkled with fabulous inventions.

The *Flateyjarbók* was written for Jón Hákonarson, a wealthy farmer in Iceland interested in literature. Thanks to an introduction, we know that it was written by two priests – Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson – which may explain its favourable depiction of Christianity. Made from 225 fine vellum leaves, the writing in the *Flateyjarbók* contains many sagas of the kings of Norway and poems. Some of these are found elsewhere, but the *Grœnlendinga saga* is found nowhere else but the *Flateyjarbók*.

The manuscript remained on the island of Flatey for centuries. In 1651, King Frederick III of Denmark sent out a request for all old manuscripts in his kingdom to be added to the royal library. The *Flateyjarbók* left its home and would not be returned to Iceland until 1971, where it is now considered to be one of the national treasures of the country.

The Flateyjarbók is the only source for the *Grœnlendinga saga* and other valuable information regarding the Norse in North America

> "When the Skraelings next came, they arrived in greater numbers"

captured it and stripped it of its flesh so that they would not go hungry that season. The cattle they set to wander freely over the land, though the bulls turned wild and vicious in their freedom. Soon the settlement was full of timber from the expansive forests, and their larders stocked with fish from the rivers and game hunted in the woods. Winter was not hard for the settlers. It looked like life in this new western land was promising.

The Skraelings came in the first summer. Many emerged from the forest but when they approached the settlers' cattle, the anger of the bull and its bellowing scared them into retreat. Fleeing from the bull, the Skraelings stumbled towards Karlsefni's home and attempted to get inside. Karlsefni barred the doors. Since none could speak the language of the other, understanding was slow to be reached. The Skraelings then set out furs and other goods to trade. Karlsefni saw that the natives were eager to get some of the Norse weapons but he forbade any of his men to swap their sharp blades for goods. In place of weapons, he offered milk from the herd and a deal was struck.

Despite the peaceable outcome, Karlsefni had the settlement surrounded by a strong wooden palisade. In this safe place, Gudrid was delivered of a baby boy – the first European to be born in North America. They called him Snorri.

When the Skraelings next came, they arrived in greater numbers but still with packs of goods to trade. Karlsefni commanded the women to take out milk, which had been so sought after last time. When the Skraelings saw the milk they were so eager to trade that they hurled their goods over the wall and into the encampment. All seemed well.

But then one of the Skraelings attempted to seize a weapon from the Norsemen. He was slain on the spot. Immediately the Skraelings fled, abandoning all of their items to escape. Karlsefni called his band together and told them they must prepare for an attack by the Skraelings. When the natives did return, Karlsefni had his warriors drive their bull in front of them since it had so terrified their opponents before. The battle went poorly for the Skraelings – one of them did manage to wrest an iron axe from a Norseman, only to kill one of his own companions as he waved it about. The Skraeling chief, a huge man of fearsome power, picked up the axe and examined it. He flung it with all his might into the sea and his men retreated into the woods, never to meet the Norsemen there again.

The Norse passed the winter in peace but Karlsefni had made up his mind to return to Greenland. The ships were loaded with the timber of the land, the furs the Skraelings had traded to them, and the bounty of the vines.

The wrath of Freydis

By now, Vinland was thought of as a place where men might make their fortunes and win renown for their bravery and skills on the ocean. It chanced to happen that just as Karlsefni returned from Vinland, a ship carrying brothers from Norway arrived in Greenland. These brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi, were received by the daughter of Erik the Red, a haughty woman called Freydis. She asked the brothers to join her in a voyage to Vinland, with the spoils of the journey to be split equally between them. Helgi and Finnbogi agreed to this bargain and preparations

A reconstruction of a Norse long house at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, where archaeologists discovered evidence of Norse settlement in the New World

were made. Each promised to take an equal number of men, but Freydis immediately broke her word and carried an extra five men on her vessel. She tried to convince her brother Leif to give his home in Vinland to her, but once again he would only lend the house for as long as she was there.

It was only on arrival in Vinland that Helgi and Finnbogi discovered Freydis' treachery. It had been agreed that the ships would stay together but it happened that the brothers' ship landed first near the settlement. Finding Leif's empty house, they moved their goods into it. Freydis was outraged at their bold move and stormed at the brothers that they must remove themselves from the home lent to her by her brother. With ill grace, the two left and set up a house beside the sea.

The settlement set to the task of gathering goods that could be profitably returned to Greenland, with Freydis felling valuable wood for timber. As winter drew in, the brothers suggested that all of the settlement could come together in the playing of games. For a time there was peace between the factions but soon the games led to arguments, and arguments led to open hostility. The games were stopped. Now no one passed from Freydis' house to the brothers' and it was as if there were two camps drawn up for battle.

In the depth of that winter, Freydis crept from her bed and, cloaked in her husband's furs, crossed to the brothers' house. Barefoot, she passed over the dewy grass. Pushing open the door, she woke Finnbogi from his sleep. "What do you want?" he asked brusquely. Freydis queried whether he was happy in this new land. Finnbogi replied that the land was plentiful and that there was no cause for the breach between the two groups of settlers, and so Freydis offered a solution. She and her followers would leave Vinland if Finnbogi gave them his ship since it was the larger of the vessels that had carried them there. To be rid of her, Finnbogi agreed. On returning to her bed, Freydis' cold, wet feet woke her husband. "Where have you been?" he asked her.

She flared up. "I have been to see Helgi and Finnbogi! I wished to buy their ship but they received me so cruelly that they struck me and sent me from their door. Will you have your wife unavenged? I will leave you if you do not rid both me and yourself of this shame!"

At this, Freydis' husband rose from his bed and gathered his men around him. They took their weapons and broke into the brothers' house as everyone inside was still in their slumber. Every person inside was bound and led out. All of the men they killed at once but none of Freydis' followers could be induced to kill the five women that were there that fateful night. Freydis called for an axe and dispatched all five of the women herself. Now she swore her men to secrecy. Any man who spoke of the day's deeds would be killed by Freydis. They would claim the brothers' group had set sail, never to be seen again.

Back in Greenland, Freydis showered those who had sailed with her with the booty of their voyage, hoping to buy their silence. But it didn't work – news of her crimes soon spread. Leif came to hear of his sister's wrongdoings and even tortured some of her followers for their crimes, but, alas, he could not bring himself to punish his own sister. From that day onwards, however, Freydis and her husband were shunned by all who met them. Meanwhile, nothing but good was spoken of Thorfinn and Gudrid. Of their line sprung many noble and blessed progeny.

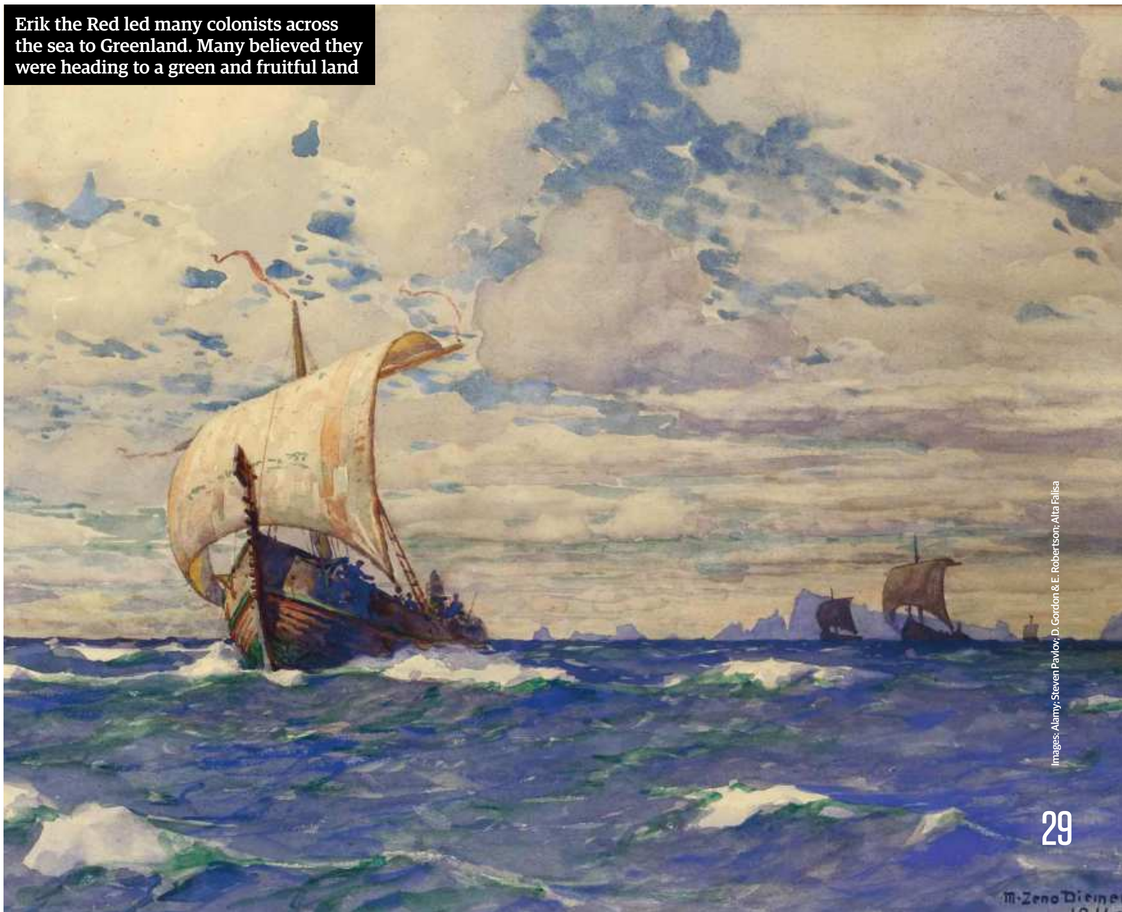
In search of Vinland

The earliest written account of the discovery of Vinland comes from around 1075 in the writings of Adam of Bremen, whose records told of the journeys into the west and the land that was found there.

"It is called Vinland because vines producing excellent wine grow wild there. That unsown crops also abound on that island we have ascertained not from fabulous reports but from the trustworthy relation of the Danes." However, the failure of the Norse to establish lasting colonies on the North American continent led to their discoveries being mostly forgotten about in Europe.

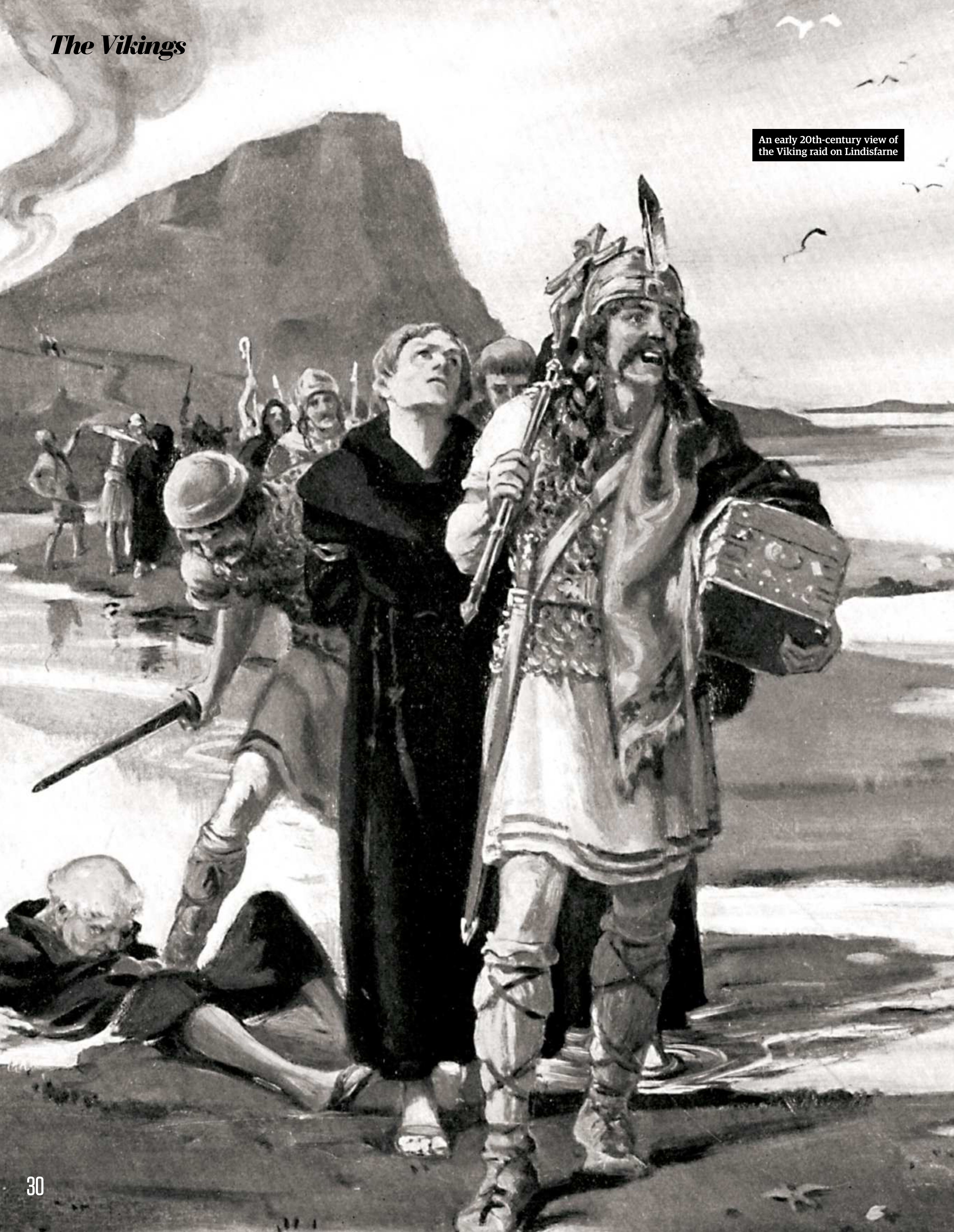
While Norse settlements have been discovered in North America by archaeologists, such as at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, the exact locations described in the saga are still under debate. At one point in the saga we are told that on the shortest day of the year, the Sun was visible between 'dagmálastaður' and 'eyktarstaður'. If we knew what exact times of day were meant by these terms, we would be able to identify the latitude of the Norse North American settlements. We might also be able to identify the unfortunate natives that were dubbed 'Skraelings'. It says much about Norse culture that the first meeting with the Skraelings was a massacre for which no cause is given. Inuit folk tales tell of killing a foreigner, using the term used for European, and knowing that they would return to seek revenge.

The mystery of the vines of Vinland also persists. Tyrker might have been sure they were grapes, but we still do not know what berries the Norse actually discovered in North America – they possibly could have been cranberries or bunchberries. Whatever they were, the wine that was produced from them was certainly potent enough to tempt others to follow in search of them.



Erik the Red led many colonists across the sea to Greenland. Many believed they were heading to a green and fruitful land

Images: Alamy; Steven Pavlov; D. Gordon & E. Robertson; Alta Falisa



An early 20th-century view of the Viking raid on Lindisfarne

Early Viking Raids on Britain

From Lindisfarne to the Great Heathen Army

Written by Wayne Bartlett

The name of Beaduheard is not perhaps as well-remembered these days as it should be. Beaduheard was a king's reeve (or sheriff), based at Dorchester in Dorset. One day in the year 789, he received news that a group of strangers had landed on the coast at nearby Portland. Portland was probably a trading base of some local significance (certainly it would be the target for a number of Viking raids over the years) and the arrival of strangers there would need to be investigated, so Beaduheard set out to do so.

The details of what happened when he arrived are unclear. Maybe there was a misunderstanding between two groups who didn't speak exactly the same language, or perhaps what occurred was quite deliberate. The end result, however, was clear enough; Beaduheard lay dead, the first known victim of the Vikings in England. His killers were men from Scandinavia, probably from Hordaland in southwest Norway.

This is the first surviving reference to a Viking attack in England. That, however, does not mean there weren't any before this; it could be that earlier attacks were unrecorded or that records were subsequently lost. There are hints though that this was not an isolated incident; charters from the reign of the great Mercian king Offa (who died in 796) mention the building of coastal fortifications against "marauding heathens", which probably means Vikings, so clearly the threat from the raiders was already starting to ring alarm bells.

While the incident at Portland may have been disturbing, it was not perhaps that unusual in what were frequently violent times. The next known raid was at the opposite end of the spectrum. It was at the other end of the country, too - rather than the kingdom of Wessex suffering another attack, it was Northumbria in the northeast that fell victim to the Viking hordes.

Lindisfarne was a very sacred site at the time; the monastery there housed the relics of Saint Cuthbert, the pre-eminent Anglo-Saxon saint. Nowadays it seems a remote and distant place, but at the end of the 8th century it was a hub of spiritual and physical activity. A few miles off, well within view on most days, was the ancient Northumbrian fortress of Bamburgh, one of the oldest occupied sites of Anglo-Saxon England, keeping a distant but in this case useless watch on the monastery.

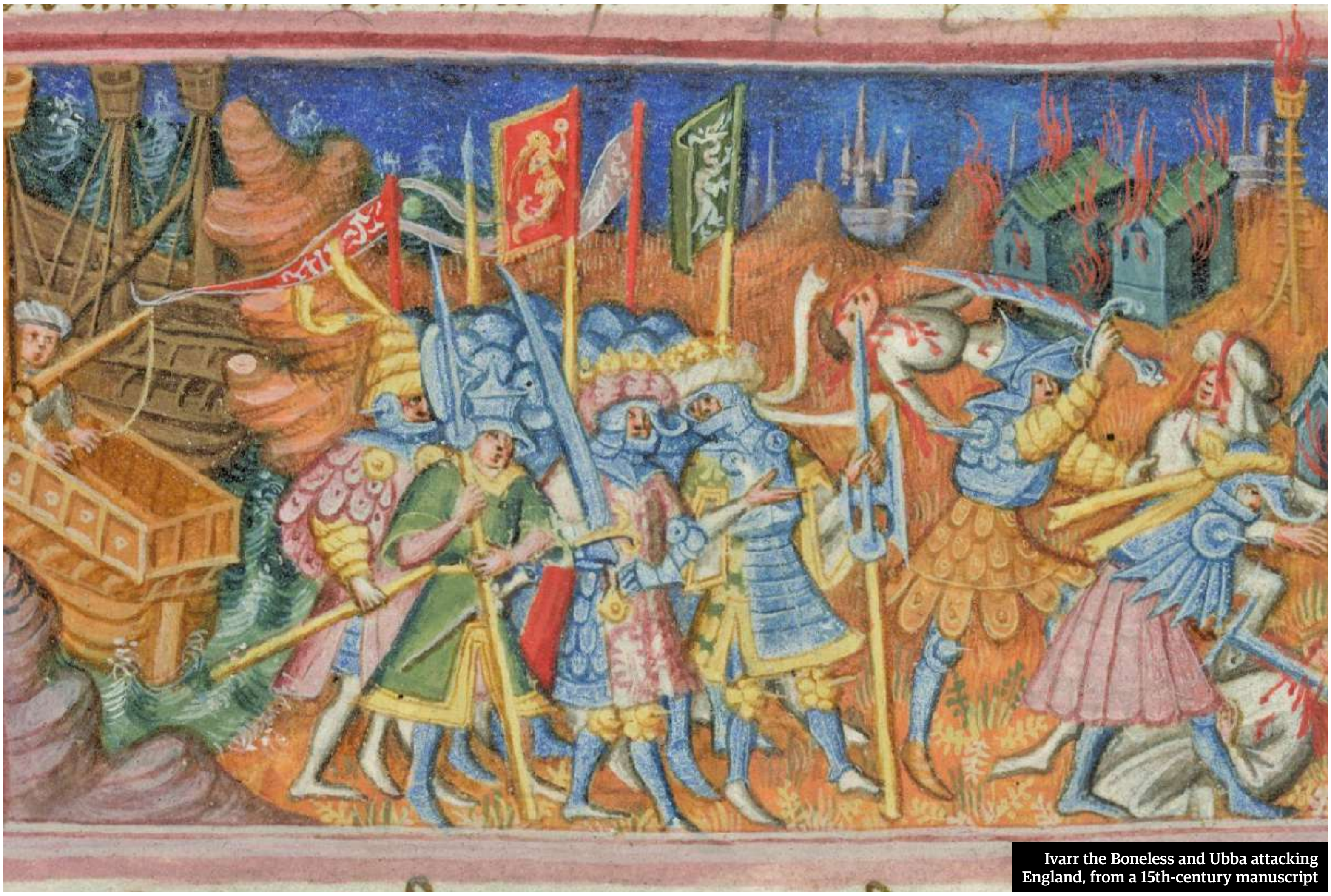
On a June day in 793, a hammer-blow fell on the monastery in the shape of a catastrophic Viking raid. The monks were caught completely unaware when the raiders came in from the sea, though it is quite probable that the raiders knew exactly where they were headed. Lindisfarne was famous and, by the standards of the day, wealthy. It is quite possible that the raiders had traded with the place before and noticed its flimsy protection. It was very common for a Viking to be a trader one day and a raider the next; whatever seemed to offer the best chance of profit in any given circumstance would dictate which one it would be.

Lindisfarne went up in flames. Its treasures were looted (to the Vikings that would mean taking gold and silver rather than the wonderful manuscripts made there - unless these happened to be in richly decorated book bindings, they were of little interest). Monks were drowned or brutally murdered where they stood. But there was another prize on offer too, one that was altogether more sinister and possibly more attractive to the raiders: slaves. The Vikings would make a very lucrative living from the buoyant slave trade and healthy young men, attractive women and children with the potential to be either were very valuable commodities. Certainly the raiders took slaves away with them from Lindisfarne, as they would on many other occasions in the future.

In Francia, the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin, who was based at the court of the great Holy Roman emperor Charlemagne, wrote back home in shock at the turn of events in Northumbria. To him, as to many subsequent commentators, the Vikings were God's avengers, a terrifying punishment for the sinful way of life lived by many Northumbrians, both secular and clerical. Loose-living, and even dressing like pagans, were quoted as some of the specific sins that had outraged God. The Northumbrians would need to mend their ways or more raids would follow.

And follow they did, for a time; other great monasteries were raided such as those at Jarrow-Monkwearmouth and Hartness (later Hartlepool). But in the first few decades of the 9th century,

Image: Getty Images



Ivarr the Boneless and Ubba attacking England, from a 15th-century manuscript

specific mentions of Viking raids in England dry up. This again does not necessarily mean that none took place; certainly the Vikings were known to be very active in Ireland and Scotland during this period. However, our main source for the period, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, was not written up until towards the end of the 9th century, so in the interim records may have been lost.

Vikings were certainly active in Wessex once more in 836, when they attacked Carhampton in Somerset, an important royal estate. The West Saxon king Ecgbert was defeated when he faced them in battle. He had his revenge, though, when shortly afterwards he bested a combined Viking-Cornish army at Hingston Down near the River Tamar. Cornwall had recently been subjugated by the West Saxons and clearly some of the Cornish thought that an alliance with a Viking force was preferable to being under the control of Wessex. The Vikings were very capable of forging alliances when it suited their purpose.

The intensity of the Viking attacks ratcheted up in the 850s and 860s. In 851 a Viking force over-wintered at Thanet in Kent rather than go home for the season. This suggested that Viking attacks were becoming more ambitious in their scope and coincided with an upsurge in activity in Ireland, too. While there was no direct political relationship between the kingdoms of England and those of Ireland, their proximity meant that Vikings were able to move and raid between the two main islands with relative impunity.

The climax of this upsurge in activity saw the arrival of what was ominously known as the Great Heathen Army (mycel hæþen here) in 865. This was allegedly led by three sons of a legendary figure, Ragnar Loðbrok, who were named Halfdan, Ubba and Ivarr (possibly another equally legendary figure known as Ivarr the Boneless). They first of all made their way to East Anglia where they forced the king, Edmund, to provide them with horses and provisions (the Vikings were outstanding horsemen as well as seafarers). This substantial force then took York (Anglo-Saxon Eoforwic), which would eventually become Jorvik, the foremost Viking settlement in England. In the process they slaughtered the incumbent king whose name was Ælle. In one lurid account, he was subjected to the brutal ritual execution known as the 'blood eagle', in which the victim's torso was cut open, his ribs hacked apart and his lungs splayed across his back like wings in a macabre imitation of an eagle. Not all historians believed that this actually happened – much of the Viking story is told by later saga-writers who clearly had an interest in embellishing their plotlines – but there are other accounts of this ritual execution being used, so we cannot be sure that the story is a complete fabrication.

> "They slaughtered the incumbent king, Ælle. In one lurid account, he was subjected to a brutal ritual execution"

The Vikings then moved on Mercia, forcing the kingdom into submission, before returning to East Anglia. This time they took the kingdom here too, in the process killing King Edmund. In some accounts (written slightly after the event) Edmund was also ritually executed, this time by being tied up and shot to death with arrows in imitation of Saint Sebastian. Certainly Edmund would become England's foremost martyr-king and he

Lindisfarne, where the Viking attack in 793 caused widespread shock in Europe

would become a prominent saint, which is ironic considering that many Christianised Vikings later set up their home in the country.

Wessex now stood alone, and the Great Heathen Army fell on it in 870. Ivarr was now absent from the army - he is known to have been active in Scotland and Ireland at about this time - and the force was led by Halfdan and a new leader by the name of Guthrum. In the succeeding year, the Great Heathen Army moved deeper into Wessex in a campaign that included nine battles and undoubtedly many other skirmishes. There was supposedly a great Anglo-Saxon victory at Ashdown, but in fact this made little difference to the course of events.

The Viking war machine moved inexorably on, winning victories at Basing, Meretun and Wilton. Sometime during the campaign the king of Wessex, Æthelred I, died - possibly of wounds suffered in one of the battles - and his place was taken by his young, then-inexperienced brother Alfred. Alfred had grown up quickly during the campaign and negotiated a truce with the Viking force - undoubtedly an arrangement that cost him a lot of money. The Vikings, satisfied with the takings from their extended foray but possibly also needing to regroup and reinforce, moved out of Wessex for the time being; but they would not be away for long. Their absence gave the soon-to-be great Alfred a chance to rally… and plan his revenge.

What's in a name?

It's time to uncover why we call them 'Vikings'

There are several theories as to how the Vikings got their name. One is that the word 'Viking' derives from the Old Norse 'vik', which means creek or bay, referring to the harbours where they moored their ships. Another theory is that the name comes from the region known as the Viken, around the Oslofjord in Norway, though this would be somewhat misleading as many Vikings came from other parts of Norway, as well as Sweden and Denmark and even further afield. In Old Norse, to go a-viking (fara i viking) was to set out on a raid, so perhaps the most likely origin of the word means some kind of raider.

They were rarely called Vikings by their victims. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* they were often referred to as Danes, while elsewhere, such as in Francia (which covered modern France, the Low Countries and much of Germany) they were called Northmen, from which the word 'Norman' derives. The suggestion of a specific national origin for the raiders is misleading: so-called Danish armies that invaded England, for example, often had warriors from Sweden and Norway among their number. There is even archaeological evidence that men might have come from as far away as Finland, Poland and Belarus on occasion.

Vikings are often depicted as raiding warriors

Image: xlibber CC BY 2.0 (Lindisfarne Castle)

Alfred Vs the Vikings

How a defeated and abandoned king rose from the ultimate underdog to become one of the most celebrated monarchs in English history

Written by Frances White

The rain thundered down on the wet, swampy moors of Wessex. A crack of lightning set the sky alight before the wasteland was plunged into darkness once more. Alfred staggered as he ran breathlessly through the plains, accompanied by a handful of men. They were all pale, shivering and soaked to the bone.

"We must find shelter." The words had barely left Alfred's mouth before his foot caught on a root and he crashed into the mud. "My lord," his companion offered his hand, but Alfred shook his head and pushed himself to his feet. Standing breathlessly in the wide, open plain, he glanced back to the land that was once his. The cities of Wessex were a mere glimmer in the distance, little lights where he had grown into a man, shot his first boar and fathered his children. Now they belonged to his enemies and he was an exile, betrayed by those he thought loyal, no longer a king and anything but great.

Alfred was not born to be king. He wasn't strong, he suffered with illness throughout his life and most of all, he was the fifth-born son. He seemed destined to a life of study in the priesthood, something he was perfectly happy about. Although far from a coward, he was milder and more thoughtful than his rowdy brothers. But he had been born in a time of unrest and war.

Since the attack on Lindisfarne monastery in 793, Viking raids all around Britain had increased in number and ferocity. In 865, a huge army dismounted from a fleet of ships, and while the previous attacks had been men eager for quick plunder, this was an army that didn't intend to return home. It wanted one thing: conquest.

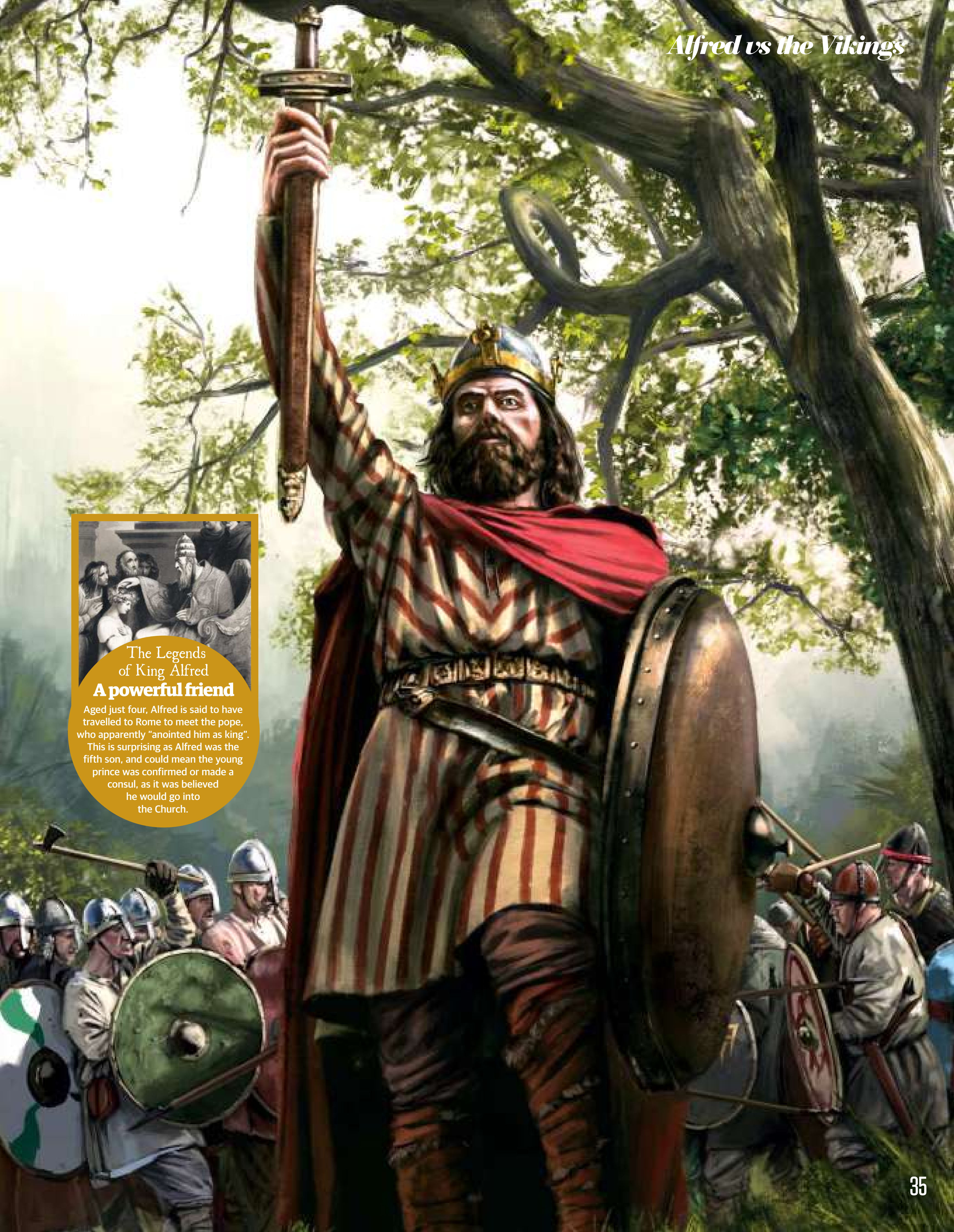
This attack was very bad timing for the kingdom of Wessex. Alfred's father, king of Wessex for nearly 20 years, was dead. The throne passed between his two eldest sons, but death followed them both quickly, and in 865, the leadership fell to Alfred's older brother Æthelred.

In 866, the Viking army was on the move. At least 1,000 strong, it slaughtered its way across the country, felling any nation that stood in its way. East Anglia, Northumbria and even Mercia, Wessex's northern neighbour, became Viking property. Those kings who tried to pay the invaders off, such as the East Anglian monarch, Edmund, found themselves later repaid by swift and brutal conquest. Soon, the only Anglo-Saxon nation that remained unclaimed by the pagan raiders was the exposed kingdom of Wessex.

The Vikings were not hesitant about making their move; they captured Reading in the winter of 870 but suffered a surprising defeat at Englefield by a small Anglo-Saxon force. Spurred by news of this triumph, the young king and his brother were determined to stop the raiders in their tracks. Fuelled by the taste of victory, Alfred and Æthelred gathered their forces for a raid on the Viking stronghold in Reading.

Although they were filled with dogged determination, this was the first time both of the brothers had faced a real battle situation, and it didn't end well. Although they achieved initial success, when the gates of the fortress opened a wave of bloodthirsty Vikings poured out and laid waste to the Wessex forces. The English turned and fled for their lives, pursued for miles. It was a humiliating defeat for the man who would one day be known as 'great'.

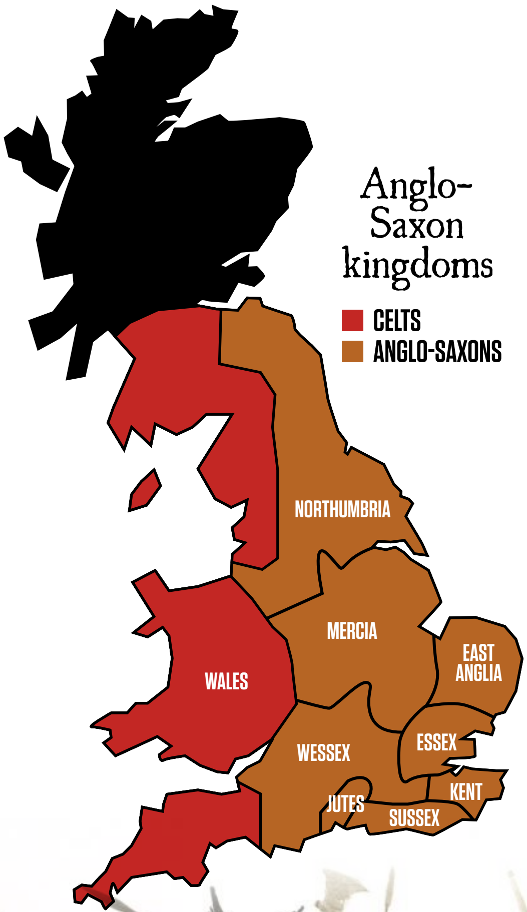
For the Vikings, the victory was all the encouragement they needed. With Wessex exposed and the rest of England in submission, they stormed towards the centre of the region.



The Legends of King Alfred

A powerful friend

Aged just four, Alfred is said to have travelled to Rome to meet the pope, who apparently "anointed him as king". This is surprising as Alfred was the fifth son, and could mean the young prince was confirmed or made a consul, as it was believed he would go into the Church.



The raiders outnumbered the fractured and broken Wessex forces considerably and this skeleton army could only watch as the Vikings moved closer to their capital. Although the Saxons put up a brave resistance, the battlegrounds transformed into scenes of slaughter, and as the brothers faced the Vikings for the ninth exhausting time, the Wessex army fled in panic.

The bodies of Anglo-Saxon dead were strewn about the field, and the king received a mortal wound. Within a month he was dead, and his passing was followed by the arrival of a fresh fleet of Viking ships.

Æthelred had sons, but they were young, and with the fate of Wessex dangling on a knife edge, it was agreed that Alfred would rule, in the hope that a strong ruler could unite the forces and claim victory from the jaws of defeat.

It is difficult to think of an English crown more burdensome than the one Alfred inherited in 871, aged just 22. With the Viking army ploughing its way through Wessex and drawing dangerously close to the capital, Alfred decided that he would try to settle things on his own terms. He set out to halt the army's advance at Wilton, less than 30 miles from his capital city of Winchester.

One thing was immediately obvious: Alfred was vastly outnumbered. He had struggled to quickly assemble a force and the Viking ranks were swelling with eager new conquerors and gold seekers. Aware that this was his first battle as king, Alfred knew he had no option but to lead from the front. He ordered his men to form the shield-wall and faced his mighty enemies. Perhaps benefiting from the strength that only men defending their homeland are gifted, the Wessex forces somehow managed to hold their ground. What they lacked in numbers they made up for in will and they destroyed the enemy shield-wall. In mild disbelief, Alfred watched as the Vikings fled and his men celebrated around him.

But the young Alfred had made a crucial mistake: he had failed to take advantage of his victory by pressing the retreat. The Vikings regrouped and swarmed the field. They rumbled towards the unsuspecting foe and in a moment victory turned to slaughter. It was the Wessex men, not the Vikings, who fled for their lives.

For Alfred, this defeat was the worst one yet. His army, or what remained of it, was in tatters. He had watched all the other kingdoms fall and it seemed inevitable that his own would follow. However, little did he know that the Vikings' patience too was wearing thin. No other kingdom had put up as much of a fight as Wessex and even though they had won many battles, it had come at a great loss to their numbers.

With both forces spent, Alfred made 'peace' with the Vikings. He most likely paid them a huge amount to withdraw, and for a good few years it worked. However, in 876,

The Legends of King Alfred

Quick learner

Alfred's mother, showing her children a beautiful book of Saxon poetry, told them that whoever was first able to memorise it would get to keep it. Alfred was fascinated, but unable to read. So he took it to tutors and managed to learn it, receiving the book in reward.

Accounts liken Alfred's ferocity during battle to that of a "wild boar"

Alfred faced a new foe, the Viking king Guthrum. Guthrum had already managed, through great cunning, to travel through the heart of Wessex and seize the town of Wareham from under Alfred's nose. Although they made a treaty of peace, the arrival of hundreds more Viking ships indicated relations were anything but friendly. With his army reinforced, Guthrum headed straight towards Alfred's stronghold in Chippenham with one aim in sight. He didn't want a quick raid or a battle; he wanted Wessex, and to get it he would destroy the one thing holding it together: Alfred.

Guthrum planned his attack perfectly. The Twelfth Night was a festival that took over the entire city, a season of revelry with eating, drinking and merriment. Every person from king to peasant was part of the celebration and the defences of Chippenham were exposed and unguarded. Guthrum took advantage of this lapse and the city was overrun by Vikings within moments. Alfred had no time to summon an army and was forced to flee with his family to Wiltshire. However, it turned out that the powerful Viking king with his huge force presented a very convincing argument, and one by one the nobles of Wessex bowed to their new ruler. The leadership of Wessex was destroyed and Alfred, with nobody to call on, fled into the darkness of the moors.

This was more than humiliation for the king - it was the lowest point in his life. The loss of riches meant little, as Anglo-Saxon kings did not sit on golden thrones, but side by side on the mead bench with their faithful companions. And that was just it - he had no companions, he was alone. In a world where loyalty and faithfulness were prized above all, he had been cast out, a virtual exile because of a chain of swift and brutal betrayals.

Alfred could have easily succumbed to the hopelessness of his situation, but instead he decided to fight. He and a small band of followers built a hidden camp in a swamp in Athelney, Somerset, and used it as a base to unleash hell upon the invaders. For months Alfred and his men fought a guerilla war against the Danes, sneaking out of Somerset, killing small parties of Vikings they passed, looting camps and seeking out the enemies' vulnerabilities. Their number one target was the English who had betrayed Alfred, hoping their deaths would send a clear message to his people that the king had not abandoned them.

Tales of Alfred's deeds soon spread throughout the population, comforting those loyal that the king would return and free them from their Danish suppressors. Slowly but surely a secret network of communication between the exiled king and his loyal earls formed. For Guthrum, the attacks by Alfred and his band of warriors were the last

Anatomy of an Anglo-Saxon warrior

Shield

The crucial piece of equipment for any Anglo-Saxon warrior, one of the primary battle tactics was the shield-wall. Not only did this protect against the enemies' missiles, but it could also be used to push forward and break the enemy line. The first shield line to break would be the losers, so hardy, strong shields were essential.

Spear

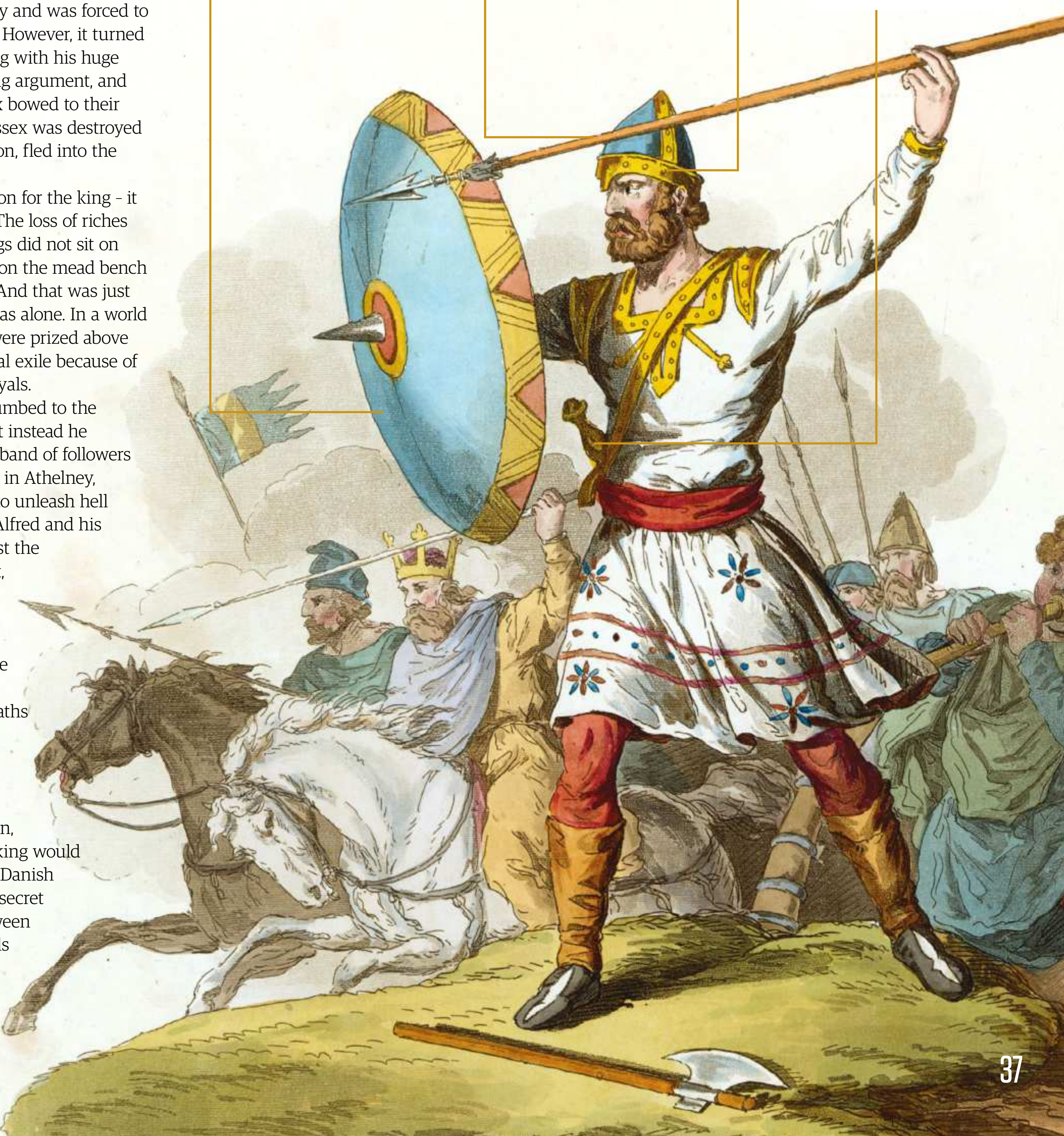
Possibly the most common Anglo-Saxon weapon, spears went hand in hand with the shield-wall tactic, being thrown as javelins and thrusting weapons. The size and material of spearheads differed hugely, as did the length – ranging from about five foot to over nine foot.

Helmet

Known as 'helms', the lack of evidence of Anglo-Saxon helmets have led many to believe that they were not commonly used, or were made from perishable materials like leather. The earliest Anglo-Saxon helmet discovered was found at Sutton Hoo and dates as far back as the 6th century.

Sword

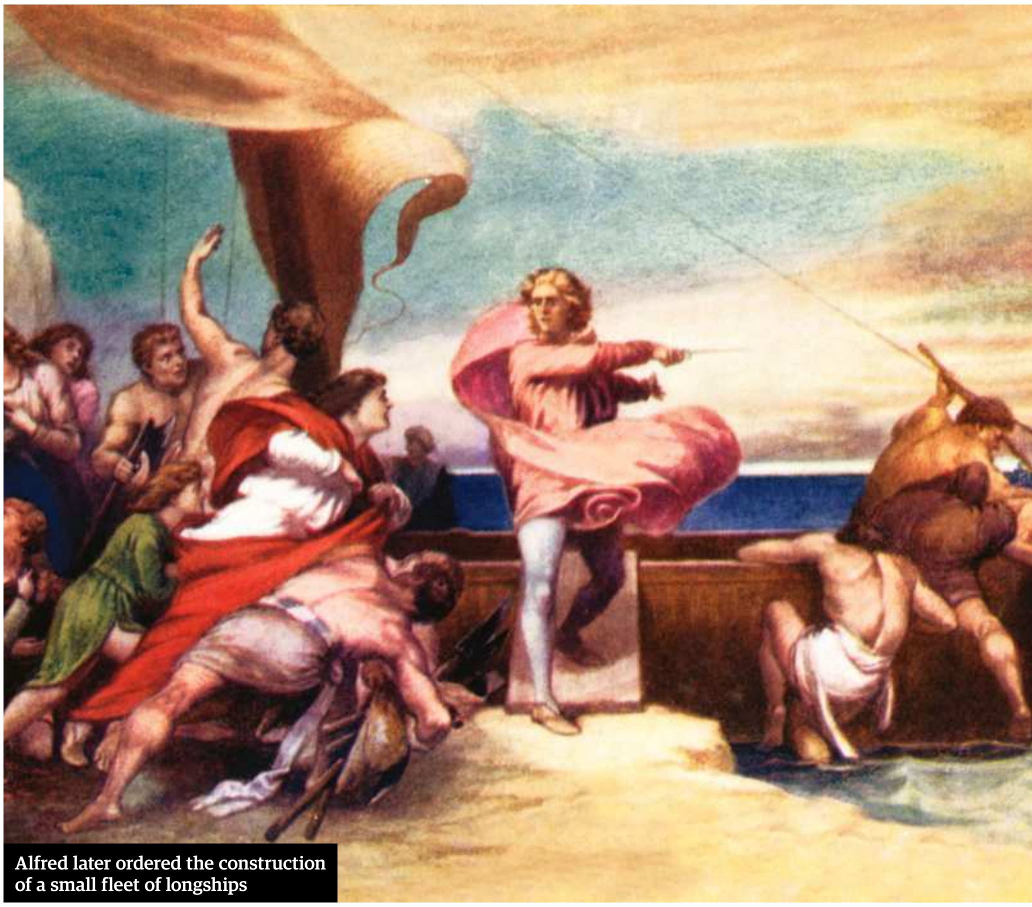
Swords were very treasured items, with connotations of status, and not just any soldier could wield one. Rather than melting iron ore, the blades of swords were constructed from several small pieces of iron or welded together. Swords would also often be decorated with inscriptions, and one 6th-century example bears the mark "Sigimer made this sword".



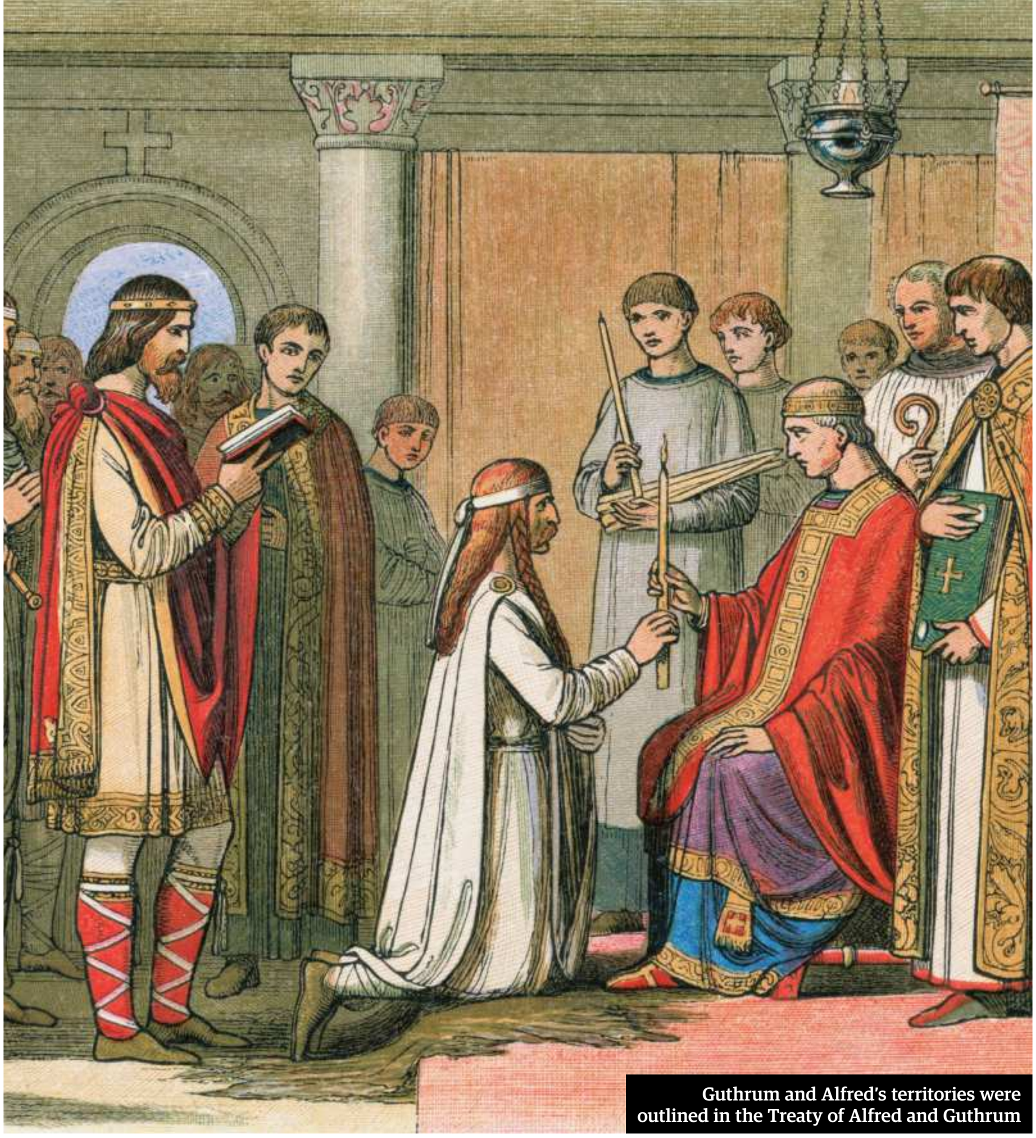
The search for a king's remains

Although we don't know the exact circumstances of Alfred's death, it is known that he suffered from a lifelong condition that may have been Crohn's disease. After his death, Alfred was first buried in the Old Minster in Winchester in 899, but four years later his body was moved to the New Minster. According to legend, this was because his body wandered around the church, but it is more likely that New Minster was the original intended resting place. He didn't get to rest for long though, as in 1110 Alfred's body was transferred to Hyde Abbey. In 1539, during the reign of Henry VIII, the church was demolished, but the graves remained intact.

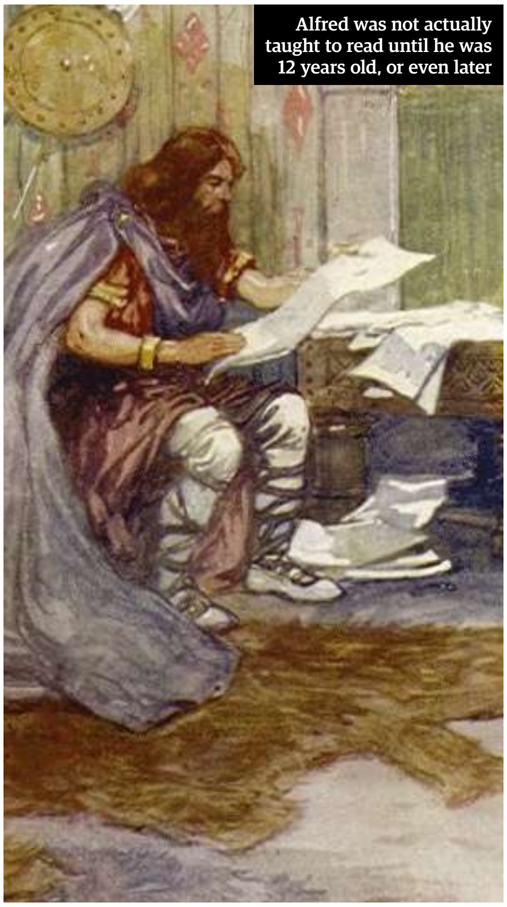
The site lay pretty much untouched until it was purchased to construct a prison in 1788. Convicts likely discovered the coffins while ridding the site of rubble, and promptly pocketed anything of value. Any bones found were simply tossed around the area. The prison was torn down between 1846 and 1850, and in 1999 an excavation discovered not only the foundations of the abbey, but also some bones. However, to much disappointment, these remains were found to belong to an elderly woman, and the rest of the excavation objects were placed in a store room in a Winchester museum. However, in 2014 it was announced that a fragment of pelvic bone from this find had belonged to a man aged between 26 and 45, who died between 895 and 1017. Although it has not yet been proven, this age and date range makes it very likely that the bone belongs either to Alfred or his son, Edward.



Alfred later ordered the construction of a small fleet of longships



Guthrum and Alfred's territories were outlined in the Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum

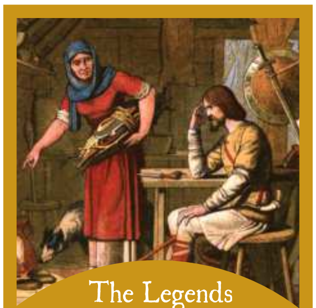


Alfred was not actually taught to read until he was 12 years old, or even later

stumbling block to full control of Wessex, and he wanted rid of the persistent pest once and for all.

By the middle of April, Alfred was ready for war; he sent out a secret summons and assembled those faithful to him - an army of several thousand men - and headed for Guthrum's stronghold in Chippenham. Guthrum soon learned of this large gathering, assembled his own army, and headed to intercept Alfred. The time for pay-offs and promises was over. Guthrum didn't care how many riches Alfred could offer - he wanted to rule unrivalled, which is exactly what Alfred wanted too.

Before he was able to reach Chippenham, Alfred caught sight of his enemy; a menacing shield-wall of towering Vikings jeered the exiled king. Alfred hastily formed his own shield-wall, and fortified it not only with physical strength but with a rousing speech. He implored his men to summon their courage, damned those who would dare to run, and promised glory to those who remained. Then he joined the wall and advanced.



The Legends of King Alfred

Burning of the cakes

This legend is one of the most well known. While Alfred was on the run from the Vikings after the attack at Chippenham, he apparently sought refuge in the home of an old peasant woman. Seeing how run down, tired and hungry he was, she took pity on Alfred, unaware he was the king, and promised him food and shelter if he watched her cakes (small loaves of bread) while she went out. The king, consumed by his own problems concerning how he was going to beat the invaders, was distracted and let the cakes burn. When the woman returned, she scolded, and in some accounts even struck the king for his absentmindedness.

As the two walls drew close, the sky blackened with spears. Men were struck and fell, but both lines steadily advanced. As the Vikings mocked their opponents, Alfred made his cries of encouragement heard over the taunts. By now the walls were mere feet from each other, but the Vikings had one last trick. They unleashed their berserkers, savage warriors who used hallucinogens to drive them into a bloodthirsty rage. The naked men crashed into the Wessex shield-wall, but the effect was not as Guthrum had hoped. The Anglo-Saxons stood strong and unfazed, slaughtering the berserkers within moments.

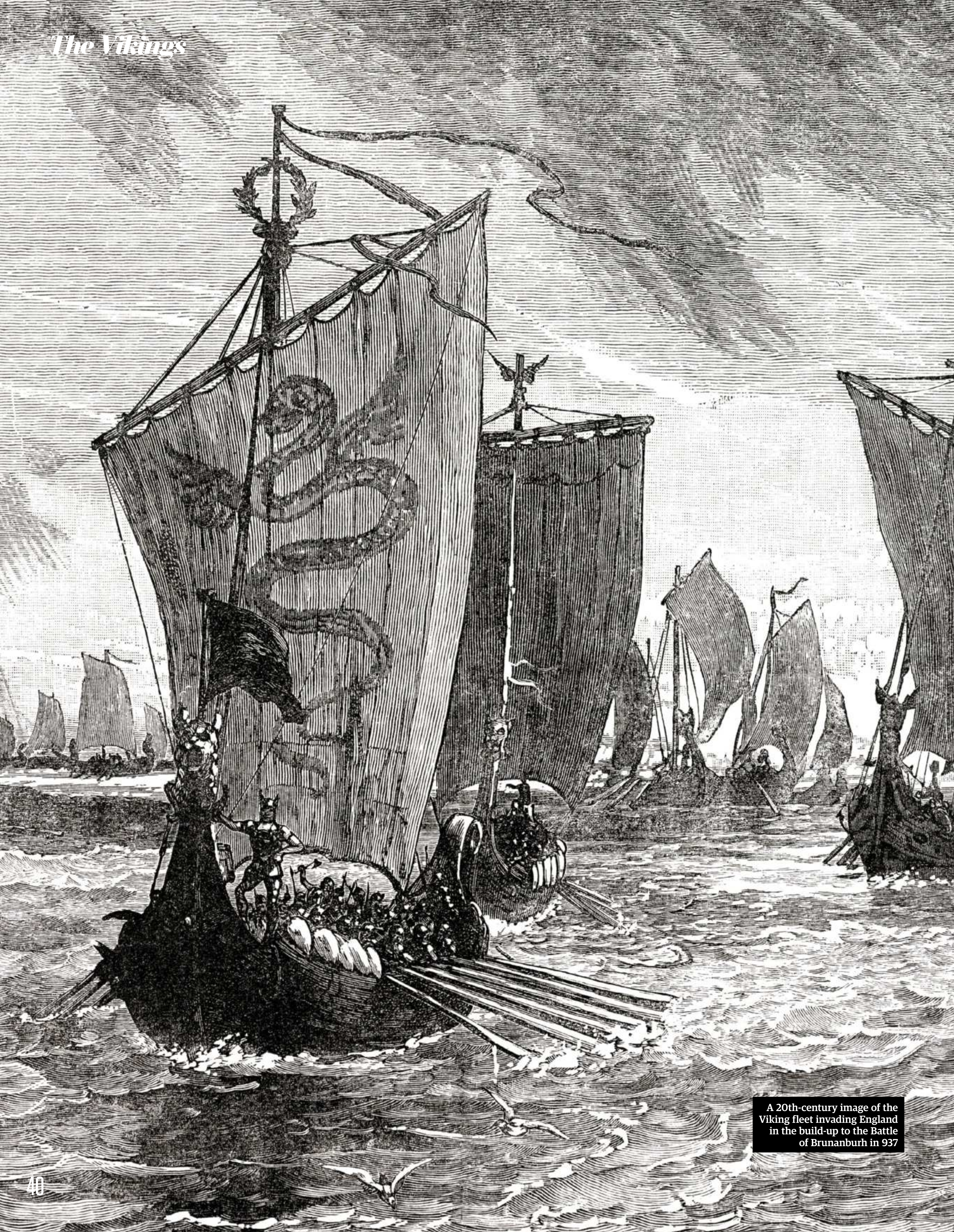
When the two shield-walls crashed into each other, the Saxons were stronger than ever. Spears jabbed, desperate to find a weak point to expose and force the shield-wall open.

The battle waged on into the afternoon, the ground was littered with corpses and those who remained were crippled with exhaustion. It transformed from a battle of might to one of endurance. With their forces equally matched, only the men with more resolve would emerge as the victors, and the Vikings were flagging. The fact was simple - the men of Wessex cared more for their home than the invaders ever could.

Finally, the Viking shield-wall was broken. The Saxons unleashed hell upon their invaders. Chaos reigned in the Norse ranks and the desperate men turned and fled. Alfred was not going to make the same mistake that had cost him so dearly again and he led the charge after the retreating men, staining the plains red with Viking blood. Guthrum managed to make it to Chippenham and attempted to begin a siege, but Alfred's resolve could not be broken. He set up his forces outside, waiting for the inevitable surrender.

After 14 days, Guthrum's will was spent. He begged Alfred for a chance to escape with his life, he would give the king anything - as many hostages as he wanted - he just wanted to leave. No Viking leader in history had offered such one-sided terms to an Anglo-Saxon king. Some would have taken advantage of this sign of desperation, but Alfred, although a warrior, was not a brute. He granted Guthrum mercy with one condition - Guthrum would be baptised a Christian, and Alfred would serve as godfather. Guthrum agreed - he would do anything to escape the kingdom of Wessex and its accursed king. The deed was done and the Viking king, for once, held up his side of the bargain. The two parted ways and Alfred returned to his capital in Winchester, finally free to begin rebuilding his nation.

Images: Alamy, Corbis, Look & Learn, Ian Hinley, Mary Evans



A 20th-century image of the Viking fleet invading England in the build-up to the Battle of Brunanburh in 937

The Danelaw

What happened when the Vikings settled in England?

Written by Wayne Bartlett

With the defeat of Guthrum's army by Alfred, a frontier was established, running approximately from Wessex and the western half of Mercia (the English Midlands) with the Anglo-Saxons to the southwest of it and the Vikings to the northeast. To a large extent, this reflected the status quo, with Viking-conquered territories such as East Anglia, much of Mercia and Northumbria remaining in Norse hands. An uneasy period of truce followed, which was threatened and indeed broken from time to time, but despite this it managed to remain substantially intact for a while. Many settlers emigrated from Scandinavia, and they were more interested in building a sustainable existence in England than living the life of a raider.

This is not to say that the frontier between the two zones was frozen, and one important change occurred in 886 when Alfred conquered Lundenwic (London), which had previously been in Viking-held Mercian territory. It was rapidly increasing in importance, though it was several centuries away from taking over from Winchester in terms of political precedence in southern England. This followed Viking raids in the previous year, which had given Alfred the opportunity to conquer it with legitimate reason. The treaty that was subsequently agreed between the Vikings and Alfred set the frontier along the line of Watling Street, the old Roman road, and that of the rivers Thames, Lea and Ouse.

For a while, Anglo-Saxon England, in the southwestern part of the region, and the lands held by Vikings to the northeast co-existed peacefully enough. There were occasional Viking raids on England but they mainly came from new Viking incursions from the Continent or Ireland rather than from Viking-held territory in England. There were certainly rules in place governing relations between the two domains of England that now existed, but they were largely those of two equivalents rather than of one party dominating the other.

Guthrum, who had been baptised as part of the peace treaty with Alfred, adopted a completely different approach than the swagger of the stereotypical Viking warlord he had previously adopted. He used the 'Christian name' of Æthelstan, and for the rest of his reign as ruler of Viking Mercia and East Anglia (Northumbria was in different hands at the time) continued to use this name on the coinage that he issued. Baptism into the Christian faith was an increasingly common move across the Viking world as former pagan warlords began to see the political advantages that Christianity offered. The Viking-held territories were later given the generic name of Danelaw (although this name did not start to be used until the early 11th century, over a century after the first permanent Viking settlements in England were established). As the name suggests, in this part of England, Danish law and customs were used, in contrast to the convention in Anglo-Saxon territory. However, over time the two systems came to influence each other.

Although the initial settlement of England by the Vikings was undoubtedly bloody and violent, the situation stabilised significantly as Viking settlers began to assimilate with the indigenous population. While Viking leaders may have assumed the role of local rulers, they still needed the pre-existing population to work alongside them, to tend the land and generate taxes (often paid in kind rather than currency). So although we cannot be sure, in the absence of detailed records, that there was not the occasional brutal warlord ruthlessly exploiting the local population, it is far more likely that the two populations in the Danelaw routinely (and for the most part, peacefully) co-existed.

A Viking coin-maker at work at the Jorvik Centre in York

Images: Getty Images (main), CambridgeBayWeather CC BY 2.5 (coin-maker)

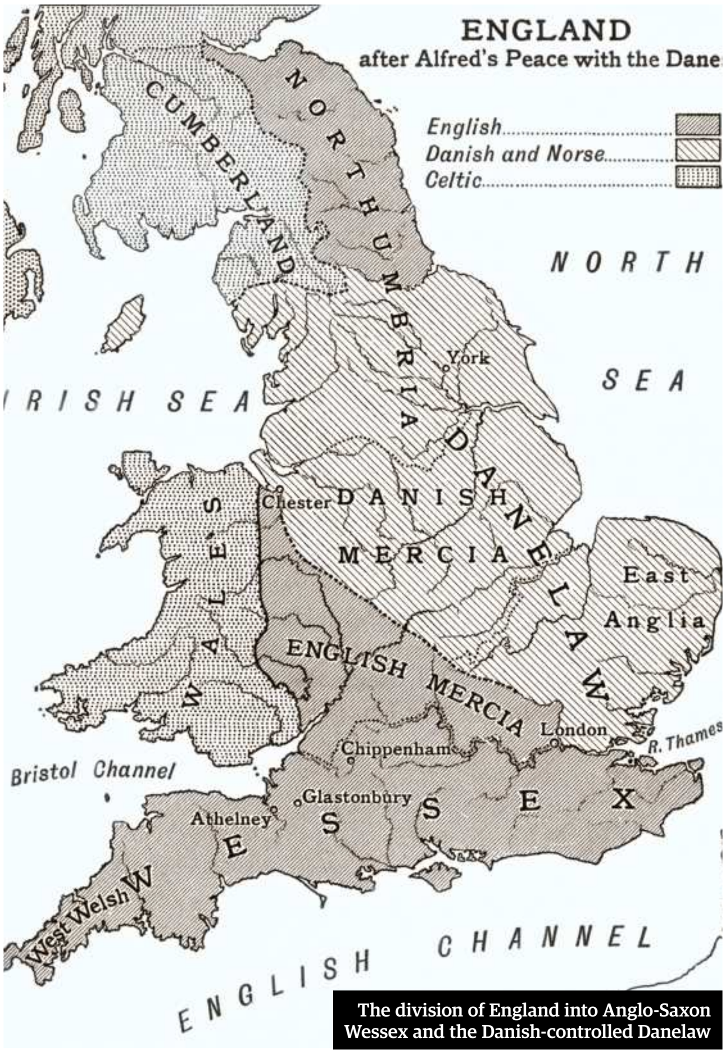
An atmospheric view of a Viking funeral

Erik Bloodaxe

The last Viking king of York?

The last Viking king of York was called Erik. Later sagas suggest that this was a man famed as a ferocious Viking warrior known evocatively as Erik Bloodaxe. Erik Bloodaxe had been involved in a bitter fight for supremacy in Norway with his half-brother, Hákon – a battle that he ultimately lost. Erik Bloodaxe therefore went into exile and lived his life as an adventurer overseas.

The last Viking king of York was almost certainly called Erik, but modern historians are not convinced this is necessarily the same man as Erik Bloodaxe – Erik is, after all, a common enough Norse name. Other accounts have Erik Bloodaxe living out his life raiding in Spain and suggest that he died there. The Erik who became king of York, whether or not he was of the Bloodaxe variety, seems to have come to power with the active connivance of the then archbishop of York, the Anglo-Saxon Wulfstan. But his grip on power was tenuous and he was ejected from the city in 954. Soon after, he was killed in what appears to have been an ambush at Stainmore, a pass in the Pennines, the 'stony moor' on the frontiers of Yorkshire, Durham and Cumbria.



The division of England into Anglo-Saxon Wessex and the Danish-controlled Danelaw

> "They pushed forward the boundaries of Anglo-Saxon territory by progressively taking over settlements in the Danelaw"

The Viking invasions had an unexpected role in the development of a unified country that would be called England. Following Alfred's death, the baton was picked up by two extraordinary people, his son Edward (known sometimes as 'The Elder') and his daughter Æthelflaed, who had married the ealdorman of Mercia. Between them, they pushed forward the boundaries of Anglo-Saxon territory by progressively taking over settlements in the Danelaw. Following a crushing victory in 910 at Tettenhall (near Wednesfield – 'Woden's Field') close to Wolverhampton, where Edward and Æthelflaed between them led a combined army from Wessex and Mercia that decimated their Viking opponents, the frontier crept forward as previously Viking-held settlements like Leicester and Derby fell into the hands of their opponents.

However, even when the Danelaw gradually returned to Anglo-Saxon hands, the rulers of Wessex (who became the dominant force in England) wisely allowed the settlers in the Viking-populated territories to maintain their own customs and laws, so a distinct identity developed, even if politically it came to be part of Anglo-Saxon England. A number of major towns emerged as urban life started to develop. The major ones – Leicester, Derby, Nottingham, Lincoln and Stamford – became known as the 'Five Boroughs'; it is notable that all but the last of these remain as county towns in modern England. Each of these was built around a fortress with its own jarl (Scandinavian for 'lord', which is linked with the English word 'earl'). These became significant commercial centres as the Viking settlers shifted their focus from raiding to trading. These settlers left their mark, not least in the English language and on the English countryside. A number of everyday modern English words have their roots in Scandinavian origins: 'anger', 'husband', 'sister' and 'egg' are just some examples of how deeply Norse is woven into

A reconstruction of a Viking settlement in a Scandinavian landscape

English. The inclusion in a place name of '-thorpe' (Scunthorpe, Cleethorpes) or '-by' (Derby, Whitby, Grimsby) is a clear sign of a settlement that was in Viking-held territory during this period. So Viking influence lives on into contemporary life, albeit in ways that are now often forgotten.

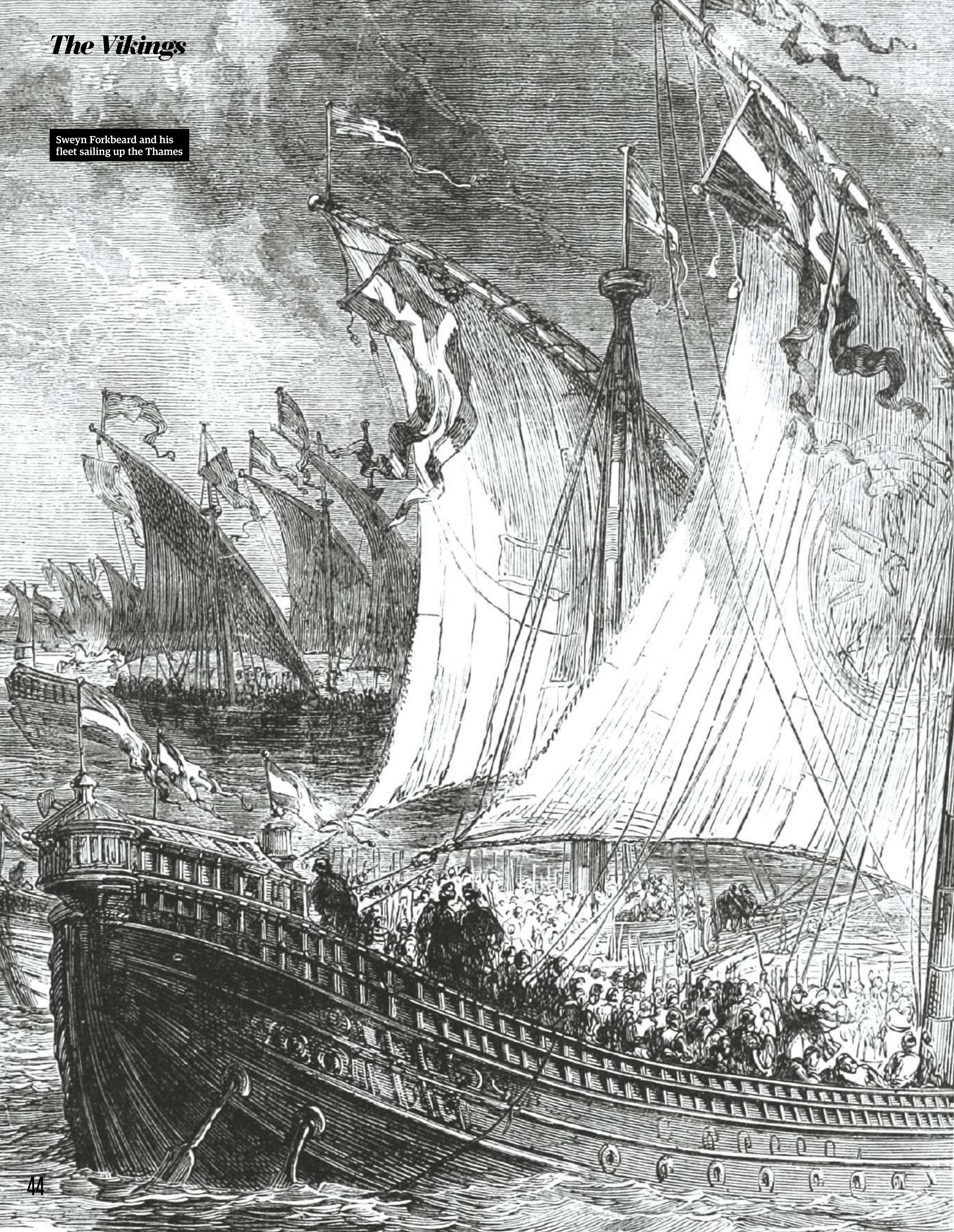
Rather than resenting the Anglo-Saxon takeover in the reign of Edward the Elder and his successors, the Viking inhabitants of the Danelaw seem to have come to terms with it well enough, at least in the region south of York. A decisive moment came in the year 937, when a massive army descended on Anglo-Saxon territory from the north. The army was formed of the combined forces of men from Scotland, Strathclyde (then a British territory in what is now northwest England and southwest Scotland) and a Viking force which had sailed over from Ireland. The English king Æthelstan (not to be confused with King Guthrum, who had adopted the same name a few decades earlier) won a decisive victory over this coalition at Brunanburh, somewhere in the north of England. At his side were men from not only Wessex and Mercia, but also those of Viking descent from the Danelaw. They had looked at the stability they had achieved under Anglo-Saxon rule and, perhaps in some cases to their surprise, found that they preferred it to the old unstable ways of the Viking world that was on offer from the alliance they fought against.

However, one part of Viking-held territory in England remained stubbornly resistant to Anglo-Saxon rule long after other parts of the Danelaw accepted it. This was the region of Northumbria, centred on York (Viking Jórvík). This maintained strong links with Viking Dublin and on a number of occasions would-be kings came over the Irish Sea in a sometimes successful (sometimes not) bid to be ruler of both. Northumbria had always, to an extent, been distinct from the rest of Anglo-Saxon England, probably a situation that was encouraged by its geographical remoteness. It is quite likely that the Northumbrians of the time were no more comfortable at the thought of being ruled by kings from Wessex far to the south than they were with Viking government.

Northumbria was composed of two sub-divisions; Deira in the south, centred around York and, further north around Bamburgh, Bernicia. Deira was the main centre of Viking territory in the north while Bernicia often remained as an independent Angle-held territory with a ruling dynasty whose head was almost invariably called Uhtred (made famous in modern times by Bernard Cornwell's historical novels on the subject). Jórvík became the bustling centre of the Viking North. Modern excavations have revealed extensive reminders of the Viking era here, especially in the Coppergate area of the city. These reveal that this was an overcrowded and unsanitary area to live in, but local merchants clearly found compensation in the living they were able to make from it. There is widespread evidence of the manufacture of combs, for example, which at the time was an important industry. Despite the humble houses that archaeology has revealed, Jórvík became something of a powerhouse.

The wealth of Jórvík made it an attractive target for Anglo-Saxon kings in the south of England, and it changed hands on several occasions during the first half of the 10th century. Several times they succeeded in conquering it (for example during the reign of Æthelstan) but then lost it again in the uncertain period that often followed the death of an Anglo-Saxon king and the almost inevitable succession crisis that followed. Eventually, the demise of a Viking ruler called Erik in 954 marked the end of the Viking kingdom in Northumbria. This appeared to be the end of an independent Viking territory in the north, but they would return to England several decades later in a new and even more terrifying guise.

Images: Getty Images (Erik Bloodaxe, map); Shutterstock (Alfred the Great, settlement)



Sweyn Forkbeard and his fleet sailing up the Thames

The Vikings Return

Sweyn Forkbeard and the conquest of Anglo-Saxon England

Written by Wayne Bartlett

As the 10th century marched on, it may have seemed that the Viking threat to England had gone away for good. With the gradual Anglo-Saxon reconquest of all the previously Viking-controlled areas of the country, it appeared as if the battle for England had at last ended. The reign of King Edgar 'the Peaceable' from 959 onwards seemed to many to be a Golden Age due to its absence of any serious Viking threat. Edgar regularly sent his fleet sailing around the shores of Britain as an unmistakable sign that his kingdom could no longer be attacked with impunity. Viking raiders heeded the message.

All this was, however, a dream that died with Edgar. Within a few short years of his demise the Viking menace reappeared, encouraged to do so by succession crises and the underlying disunity of Anglo-Saxon England. The raids gradually increased in intensity until in 991 a substantial armada of Viking ships attacked in the southeast of the country. They eventually faced off against a strong Anglo-Saxon army at Maldon in Essex, where they won a famous victory.

During this period, two men in particular assumed prominence. One of them was a Norwegian called Harald Tryggvason, and the other was a Dane by the name of Sweyn Forkbeard. While originally they would cooperate with each other, ultimately they became bitter rivals, coming to blows over the vexing question of who should be king of Norway, a position that the monarchs of Denmark had long claimed with varying degrees of success.

The king of England during these troubled times was the infamous Æthelred II, known as 'the Unready'. His strategy was to buy the raiders off by means of the notorious 'Danegeld' payments, essentially a form of protection money. It was an approach of doubtful merit; all the payments did was encourage the Vikings to return later to receive another, larger payment in what became a vicious circle of ever-increasing amounts of tribute, handed over time and time again. Yet although in the long run it badly damaged the English economy, it was an approach that was not without its successes.

The most positive example of this was when Harald Tryggvason was persuaded to become a Christian (and a very enthusiastic if rather violent one at that) and return to Norway to attempt to seize the throne, which he duly did. This had the fortunate side effect of also encouraging Sweyn Forkbeard to leave England alone as he fought Harald over Norway. Eventually the victory went to Sweyn, who crushed Harald and his fleet at the Battle of Svolder off the coast of Norway in 999 or 1000 (there are conflicting dates given by the sagas and chronicles that refer to it).

Sweyn was the son of Harald Bluetooth, the first Christian king of Denmark. Sweyn, like Harald Tryggvason, was ruthlessly ambitious, and he took on and deposed his own father. He is associated with a band of semi-legendary warriors called the Jomsvikings, who allegedly raided widely, in the Baltic in particular. After becoming king of both Denmark and Norway, he desired to add England to his growing empire. He had formidable resources available to him to help him succeed, and there was a pool of strong and vastly experienced warriors prepared to fight for him, particularly if the price was right.

Events in England in 1002 gave him the perfect excuse. During November of that year, the Anglo-Saxon king Æthelred launched a dawn raid against the Danish inhabitants of England, or some of them at least, in what became known as the St Brice's Day Massacre. He felt, perhaps with some reason, that some of the Scandinavian settlers formed what was essentially a Fifth Column inside his kingdom. It was a coordinated attack that, while it destroyed some of the Danes in England (though almost certainly not in the Danelaw, where there were simply too many people of Danish descent to wipe out), only succeeded in the long term in legitimising ever more fierce Viking attacks on the divided country.

Sweyn was at the head of these; perhaps, chroniclers suggest, because his sister Gunhild was one of the victims of the Massacre. Also among

> "Sweyn is associated with a band of semi-legendary warriors called the Jomsvikings, who raided widely"

St Frideswide's Church, Oxford, the site of a Viking-era massacre

the dead was her husband, Sweyn's brother-in-law, Pallig. Pallig had allegedly been instrumental in helping Viking raiders while at the same time accepting generous gifts from Æthelred and pretending to be his man.

Strong evidence of the Massacre has been found, including the hacked-about remains of men of Scandinavian descent, who were killed at about this time at the burned-out church of Saint Frideswide in Oxford. The victims were from the right period and were found during an archaeological dig there a few years ago. A charter that re-established the church after it was rebuilt soon after noted that this was following the actions that Æthelred had taken to "remove the cockles [weeds] from among the wheat" – a disturbing turn of phrase that shows just how much hatred the Danish settlers had created in some quarters of England.

Another stunning find in 2009 occurred near Weymouth in Dorset, when workmen constructing a new road came across the remains of over 50 men of Scandinavian descent who had been executed at around the end of the 10th century. All of them had been decapitated, some at least with their hands tied, and then thrown into a disused quarry without ceremony or care. The number found may suggest that this was the crew of a Viking ship that had been captured or run aground, but there is a possibility that they may have been victims of the Massacre too, as their remains are from the right general period.

Each year the growing Viking army would return. Although many of the army were Danes, there were also Norwegians and Swedes known to have taken part. The price required to pay them off continued to increase, and England progressively weakened and was less able to resist, until at last Sweyn could see that the ultimate prize, the English crown, was within his grasp.

There are signs of increasing strain on England; mints were moved from towns into old hill forts such as Cadbury in Somerset and Cissbury Ring in West Sussex, places that had been abandoned long ago but were now rapidly refortified in an attempt to increase levels of protection against the raiders. King Æthelred seemed increasingly incapable of fighting back against the invaders, who were able to out-manoeuvre him at every turn.

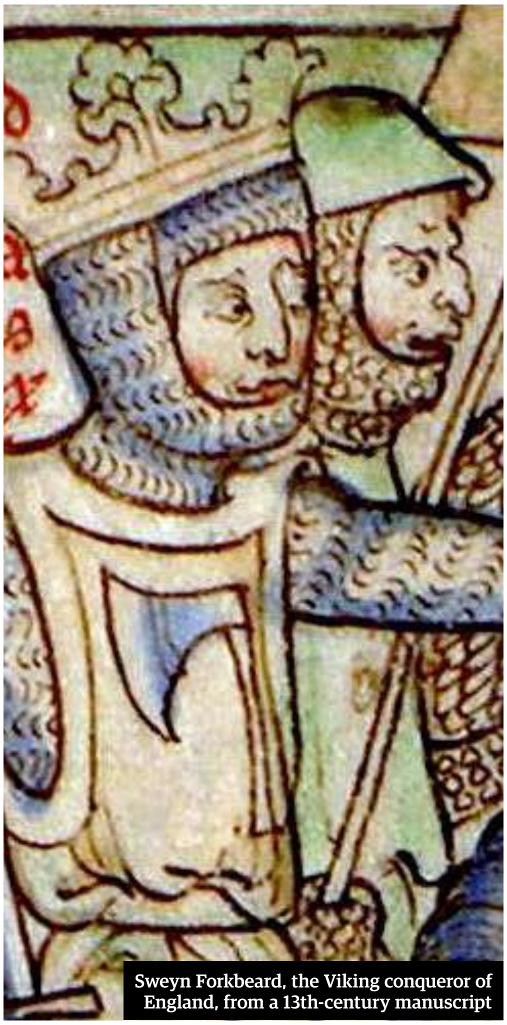
These were violent and desperate times for the people of England. An event of profound significance was the capture in 1011 of Ælfheah (also known as Alphege), the archbishop of Canterbury, who was seized by the Vikings when his city and church were captured and sacked. For the next seven months he was kept as a prisoner and taken to Greenwich, where he was held until a ransom should be paid for his release. When he proved obstinate, he was brought out in front of a drunken Viking mob and hacked to death, an event that later inspired his successor Thomas Becket when he was on the verge of his own martyrdom.

These shocking events demonstrated just how powerless Æthelred and his people were to resist for much longer. When Sweyn Forkbeard fell on England once more in 1013, it was clear that the end was close. He advanced across England in what was almost a procession. Only London showed persistent resistance, but the city became increasingly isolated.

Seeing that his time was up, Æthelred vacated his throne and fled to Normandy in ignominy. This left the way clear for Sweyn to become king of England, but then fate intervened. Before he could officially be crowned, Sweyn suddenly died. There

"These were violent and desperate times for the people of England"

Cissbury Ring, the site of an old hill fort that was called back into use during the Viking Age



Sweyn Forkbeard, the Viking conqueror of England, from a 13th-century manuscript

was no warning of ill health, and because of this, some thought that divine intervention was behind his demise. A story even developed that the ghost of King Edmund, killed by the Vikings a century and more ago, had appeared before Sweyn and run him through with a spear. Sweyn had allegedly mistreated the great abbey that had been set up to honour Edmund in East Anglia, and this was a form of supernatural payback.

An amazing reversal of fortune followed almost at once. Æthelred returned from exile in Normandy to reclaim his throne. His army fell on that of Sweyn's son and successor, the inexperienced Cnut, and utterly destroyed it. Cnut was then forced to flee for his life and returned to Denmark, leaving Æthelred to celebrate a stunning victory, though not before the Danish prince had left behind him a group of unfortunate hostages, whom he ordered to be mutilated.

The restored king did not have long to enjoy his unexpected triumph though; he was old and ill and would die soon after. A vicious war then took place between his son, Edmund 'Ironside', and Cnut, who returned with a large army soon after fleeing England. By the end of 1016, Cnut was triumphant and Edmund was dead. England was now firmly in the grasp of a Viking ruler, one that would be remembered as one of its great kings.

The Battle of Maldon

A spectacular reminder of a Viking triumph

When Vikings and Anglo-Saxons fought at Maldon in Essex in 991, they inspired one of the greatest treasures of Anglo-Saxon literature. A poem, named *The Battle of Maldon* after the skirmish, was written up to commemorate what was a bruising Viking victory, and a substantial element of the text has survived.

The poem, written in an epic style, commemorates the bravery and sacrifice of the Anglo-Saxons, which culminated in a suitably climactic event – namely the death of their leader, ealdorman Byrhtnoth. Yet the poem does not gloss over the fact that at the end, the ealdorman was deserted by some of his army, who fled the battlefield rather than die at the hands of their Viking opponents.

The Vikings had traversed a narrow causeway after requesting that Byrhtnoth should let them cross over, so that they could have a fair fight. The ealdorman, perhaps keen to bring them to battle rather than rash, agreed, and a brutal conflict followed, in which the Vikings emerged victorious.

Seeing that the end was near, the poem has Byrhtnoth issue a stirring rallying cry; "Our hearts must grow resolute, our courage more valiant, our spirits must be greater, though our strength grows less"; an early evocation of the Dunkirk spirit for which the descendants of the Anglo-Saxons later became so famous.

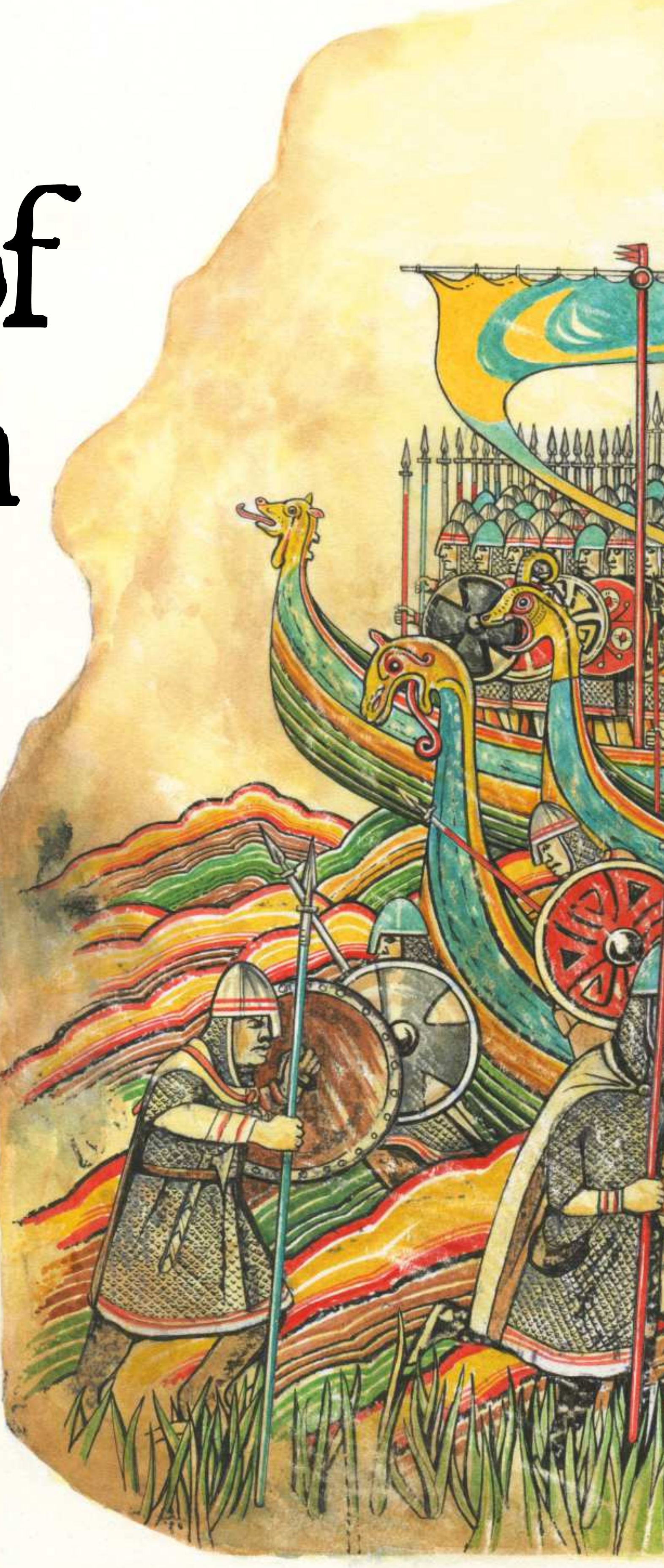
A modern statue of Byrhtnoth marks the site of his heroic death at Maldon

Images: Oxyman, Bill Nicholls CC BY-SA 2.0 (statue, St Frideswide's Church), Simon Burchell CC BY-SA 3.0 (Cissbury Ring).

Emperor of the North

1,000 years ago, a young Viking warrior became king of England. No one at the time can have expected how remarkable his reign would be

Written by Wayne Bartlett

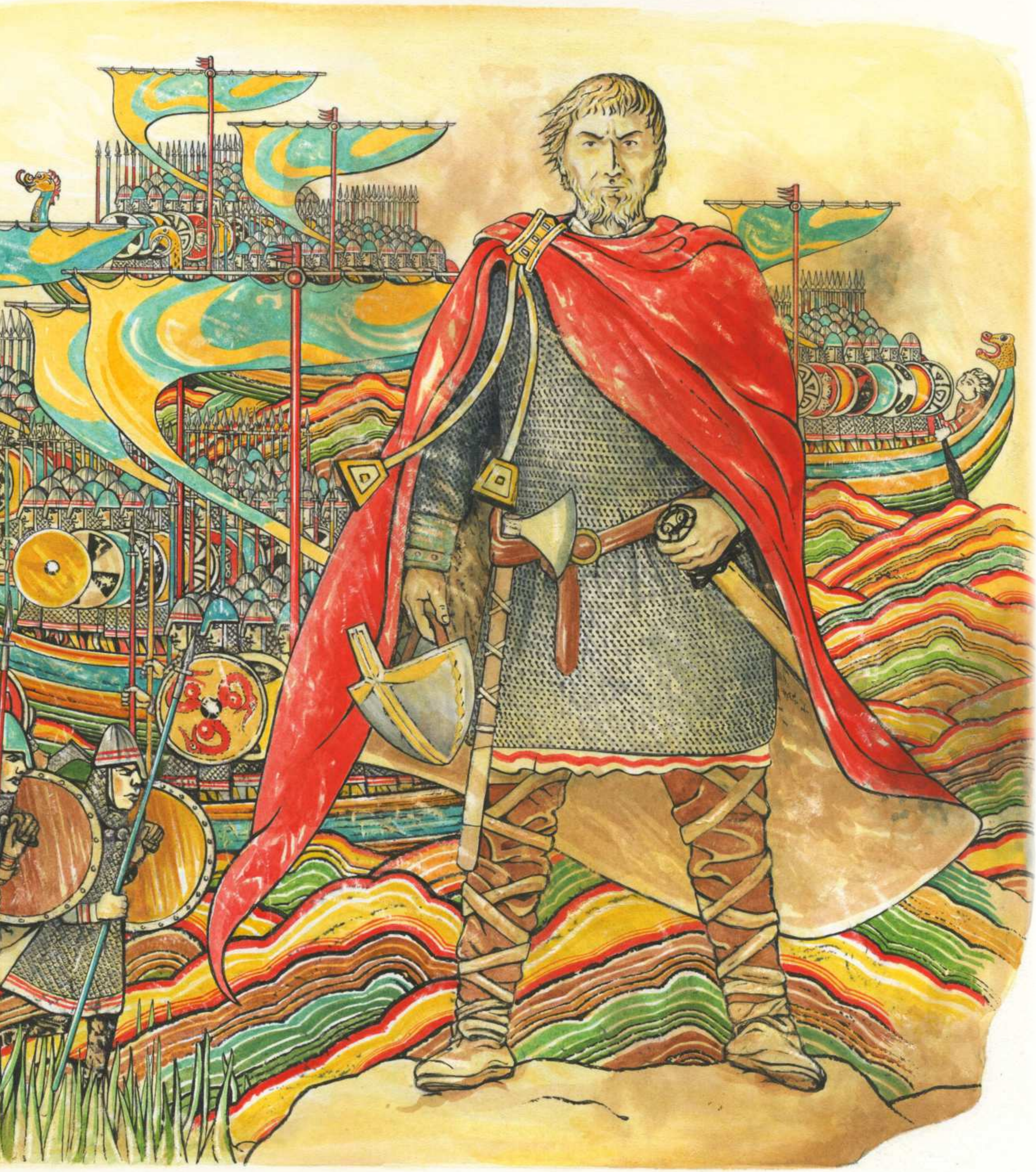


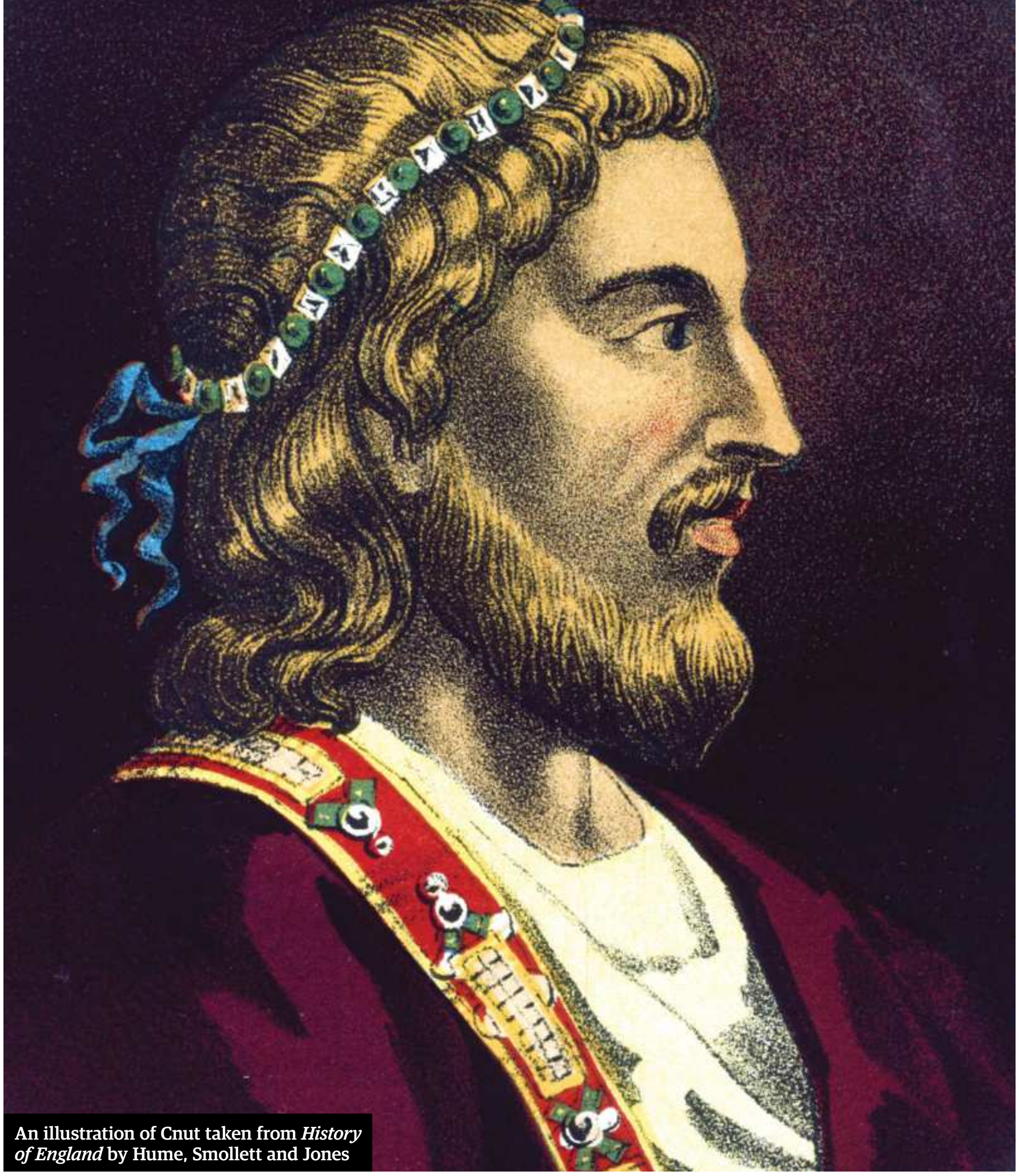
Most famous now for his futile efforts to turn back the encroaching tide on the seashore, the life of Cnut was extraordinary. As well as being a strong, reliable supporter of the Church, he was also an archetypal Viking raider. Forming part of a dynamic marital alliance with his wife, Emma, he was also accused of the murder of his brother-in-law, Ulf. As well as ruling England and Denmark, he was also for a short time king of Norway. His government of what has been called an 'Empire of the North' was a unique achievement, setting Cnut apart as a remarkable man.

Cnut's roots were in Denmark. His great-grandfather, Gorm the Old, was the founder-figure of the Jelling dynasty in Jutland. Gorm was a formidable pagan warrior, but his son, Harald Bluetooth, became an enthusiastic Christian ruler. Harald was involved in a bitter civil war with his own son, the renowned Sweyn Forkbeard, a conflict that ended with him fleeing the country and dying shortly afterwards in exile. Sweyn took over and won a reputation as a ruthless and ferocious Viking raider, frequently launching attacks on Britain, Ireland and elsewhere.

Cnut, the son of Sweyn Forkbeard, was probably born in around 995, though no one knows that for sure. The chronicles of the time are equally silent about the first 18 years of Cnut's life and it is not until 1013 that we find him first mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. But in that year he accompanied Sweyn on what was supposed to be the climactic campaign in the battle to conquer England. After several decades of raiding, increasing in scale all the time and often only ended by the payment of what later became known as 'Danegeld', Sweyn sensed that England was fatally wounded and, like a hungry predator, moved in for the kill.

He found support for his ambitions from the region of the Danelaw (around the East Midlands of modern England), and Northumbria also soon





An illustration of Cnut taken from *History of England* by Hume, Smollett and Jones

submitted to him. Moving into southern England, the defence against his forces quickly collapsed. The English king, Æthelred II ('the Unready'), soon after fled the country with his wife Emma and their children, Edward and Alfred. England, it seemed, had fallen. King Æthelred would later be painted as something of a pantomime villain, incompetent and cowardly in equal measure. It was a very harsh assessment given the enormous challenges that he had faced, but it could not be doubted that his reign had apparently ended in spectacular failure.

But just then, as if by a miracle, Sweyn died before he had been made king. Cnut was not with him at the time, having stayed in the Danelaw while Sweyn had moved into southern England. Shortly after, Cnut was badly caught out by a surprise attack on his camp launched by English forces. Æthelred returned from exile and Cnut, barely escaping with his life, fled to Denmark. Before departing, he left behind him a group of hostages minus their ears and noses. This was Cnut the Viking in action.

England's respite, though, was short-lived. In 1015, Cnut was back with 200 ships sailing through the "mouth of the Frome" into Dorset. This saw the beginning of a brutal war for the control of England between Cnut and Edmund Ironside, the son of the now-dying King Æthelred and his first wife. Both were very young warriors, in their early 20s, and the fighting that followed through several battles at Penselwood, Sherston and Otford was bloody and violent. Cnut also laid siege to London and it was a brutal contest that was fought out over a period of a year and more.

"There was a real chance the new king would milk England for all it was worth"

The last decisive battle took place at Ashingdon (or Assandun), Essex, in October 1016. It ended in a crushing victory for Cnut. Edmund survived the battle and a deal was struck that left him with Wessex but Cnut with the rest of England. The deal did not survive for long because on 30 November 1016, Edmund very conveniently died, leaving Cnut as the undisputed king of all England.

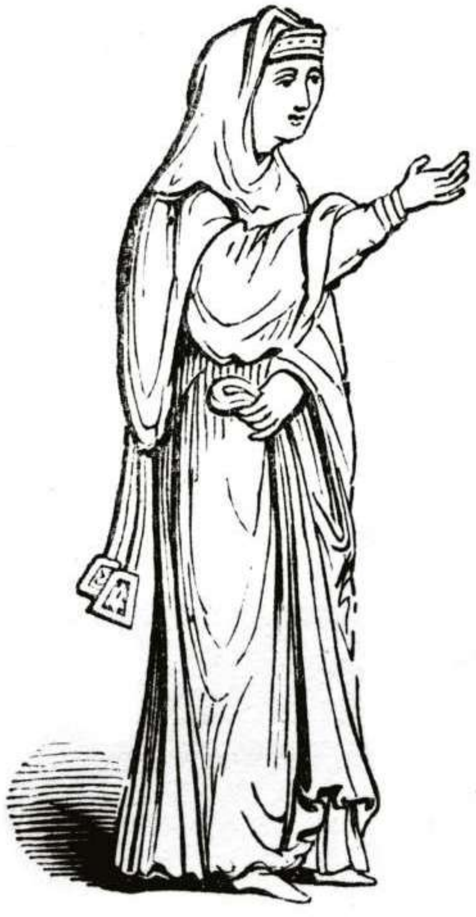
At the time, it was likely that the people of England were filled with trepidation at these developments. Given the ruthless nature of Viking raids on the country, there was a real chance that the new king would milk England for all it was worth, and early signs did little to dispel that impression. Within a year, Cnut was ruthlessly removing those who he felt were plotting against him including Eadric Streona, Earl of Mercia, whose treachery to the old regime had become a byword for duplicity and untrustworthiness.

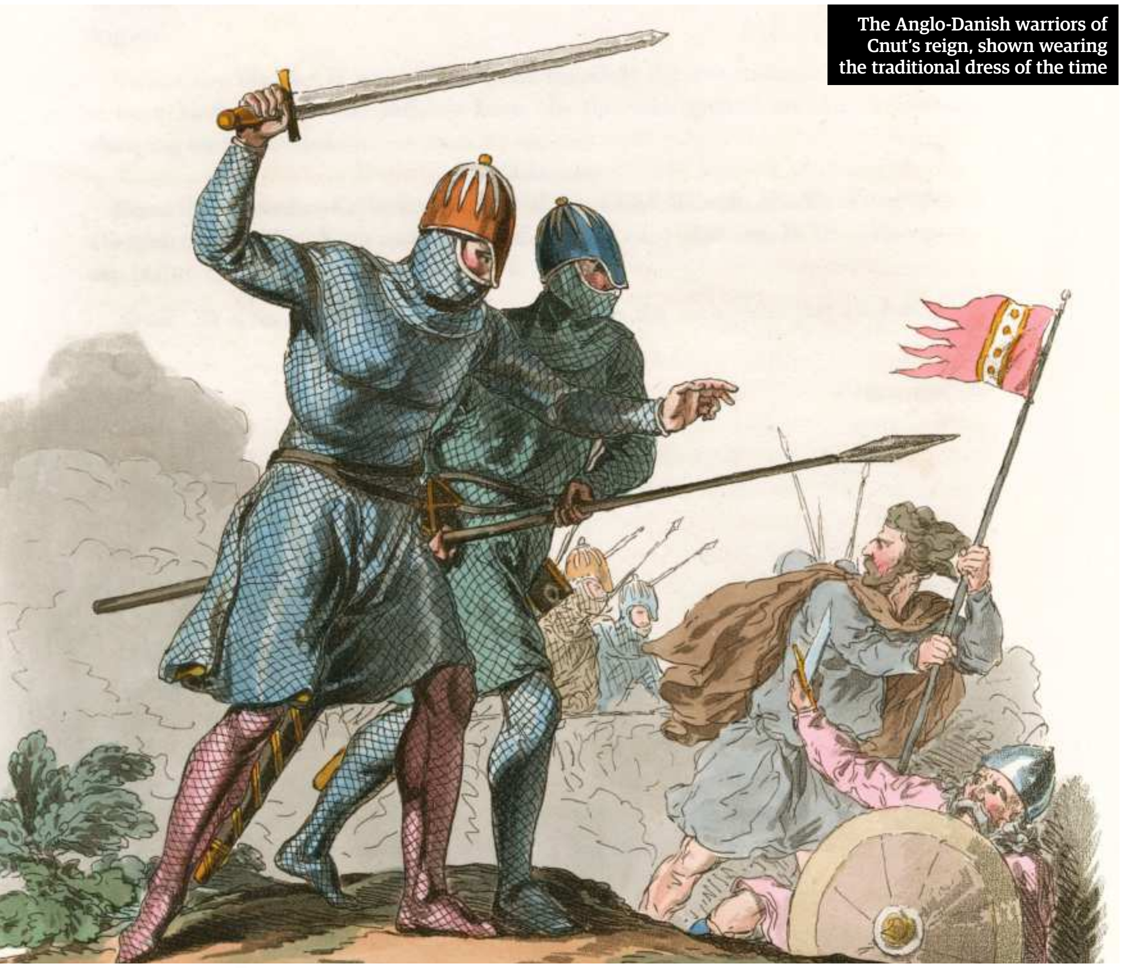
Then in 1018 he raised the highest Danegeld payment yet; £10,500 from London and £72,000 from the rest of England, massive amounts in the context of the times. But there was a sub-text to this move: Cnut's intention was to use the money to pay off Viking raiders that he no longer had a use for now that the war had been won. This would allow him to govern as he wanted to.

The first sign that there was something to this young man other than the attributes of a rip-roaring Viking raider occurred at around the same time. At a Parliament at Oxford, Cnut adopted the laws of the late King Edgar, seen as one of the greatest of all English monarchs. Edgar's reign was perceived as a Golden Age, a time of peace and prosperity. This was a canny move by Cnut.

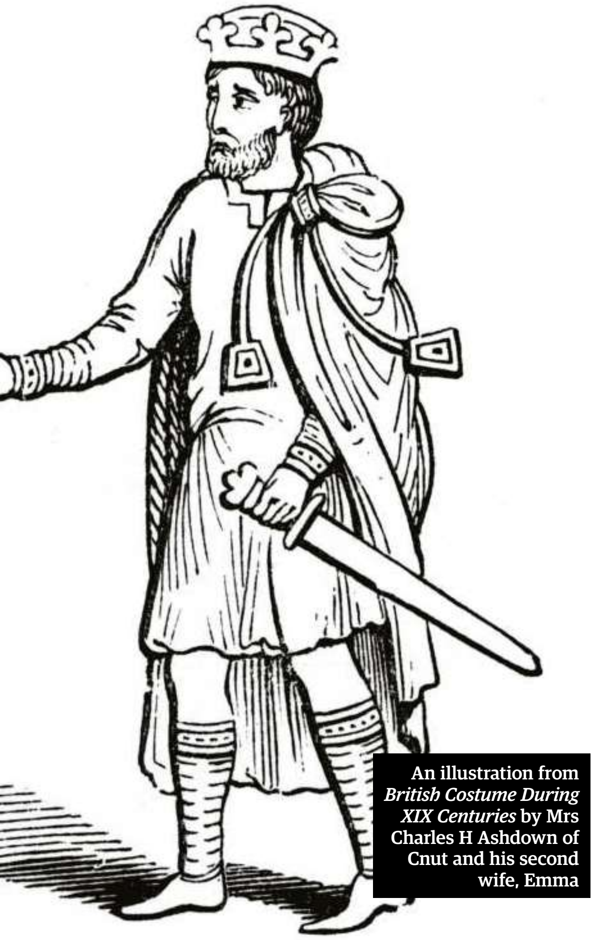
It followed another notable step when he married Emma, widow of the late king Æthelred. Emma had two children from her first marriage; Edward (later King Edward the Confessor) and Alfred. Cnut also had two children from a previous relationship with Ælfgifu of Northampton, named Sweyn and Harold (later Harold Harefoot, king of England). Emma soon after her marriage to Cnut gave birth to another son, Harthacnut.

The death, soon after, of Cnut's childless elder brother, Harald, left Denmark open and Cnut soon installed himself as king there, seemingly with little opposition. Cnut, at around the same time, strengthened his hold on England by the judicious appointment of strong supporters in positions of





The Anglo-Danish warriors of Cnut's reign, shown wearing the traditional dress of the time

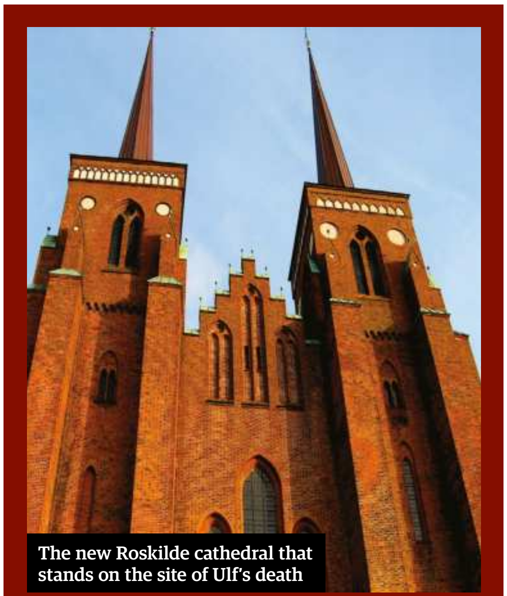


An illustration from *British Costume During XIX Centuries* by Mrs Charles H Ashdown of Cnut and his second wife, Emma

authority in the country. Most prominent among these was Earl Godwin, who Cnut appointed as his representative in the crucial sub-kingdom of Wessex. Godwin would marry the sister of Cnut's brother-in-law. They would have a number of children, including Harold, who would himself become king of England and end his life, allegedly, with an arrow in his eye, at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Norway too had once been part of the empire of Sweyn Forkbeard, Cnut's father. However, it had not remained so for long before a rebellion there threw off Danish rule. The beneficiary of that uprising and the current king of Norway was a man named Olaf Haraldsson. Olaf allied himself with the king of Sweden and together they raised an army with a view to attacking Denmark. Cnut got together an army of his own to face up to the threat. The two forces clashed in southern Sweden at the Battle of Helgeå. It was an indecisive confrontation, but Cnut succeeded in hanging on to Denmark.

Shortly after the ruthless elimination of his brother-in-law, Ulf, in Roskilde Cathedral, which followed on soon after, Cnut undertook perhaps the greatest mission of his life when he journeyed to Rome to be present at the coronation of the Holy Roman emperor, Conrad II. To be in attendance at this ceremony was a great mark of recognition for a man who was effectively a Viking king. It made a great impression on many at home and in Europe.



The new Roskilde cathedral that stands on the site of Ulf's death

Murder in the cathedral

Cnut's involvement in the elimination of his brother-in-law Ulf

Although Cnut proved himself to be a strong and successful king, on several occasions during his reign he found himself at odds with his supporters and even members of his extended family. Ulf was Cnut's brother-in-law, married to his sister Estrid. In the lead-up to the Battle of Holy River, there were suggestions that Ulf's loyalty was suspect. Cnut's young son, Harthacnut, was in Denmark as its nominal ruler and it seems that Ulf tried to dominate political affairs there in the absence of a powerful king resident in the country.

Nevertheless, Ulf appears to have been with Cnut when he took part in the hard-fought battle at Helgeå. After, they returned to Denmark together to the royal capital, Roskilde. There was soon a family squabble, according to some accounts over something as trivial as a chess game. It may though have been something less insignificant such as a breakdown in trust between the two that led to Cnut's next action.

Clearly angered by something that had taken place, Cnut sent men to eliminate Ulf once and for all. They found him inside Roskilde Cathedral, though some accounts say Ulf was on the royal farm. However, the cathedral was not the imposing building that one sees now with the tombs of many of Denmark's later monarchs, but a much humbler wooden 'stave' church of simple design and intimate size. While some men hesitated to carry out orders given the sacred nature of the place, one of them, Ivar White, had no such scruples and struck Ulf dead.

This unchristian act must have created alarm and as Cnut was able to survive this incident with his reputation relatively intact speaks highly of his political skills. However, it would seem that his own sister was not prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt and her son Sweyn was sent into protective exile for the remainder of Cnut's life. Cnut paid large sums of money to Estrid to allow her to build a grander structure at Roskilde perhaps as a way of salving a guilty conscience.

Images: Mary Evans (Cnut illustration, Anglo-Danish warriors), Getty Images (British Costume During XIX Centuries), Mariusz Paździora CC BY-SA 3.0 (Roskilde)

Perhaps the most significant part of Cnut's reign was the way in which he built close relationships with the Church. He was a generous patron of a number of religious establishments in both England and Denmark. He also appointed allies into key positions of influence in the Church, such as when Æthelnoth was made archbishop of Canterbury in 1020. This helped to build his influence and reputation, and further strengthen his position.

However, the question of Norway was unfinished business as far as Cnut was concerned. Following his return from the indecisive battle at Helgeå, King Olaf's position had become increasingly fragile back in Norway. It was then a very fragmented country with a number of regions, especially those positioned in the wild north that were virtually ungovernable. Cnut took advantage of the significant wealth of England to make gifts to disaffected nobles in Norway. When he arrived with a massive army, the position of Olaf quickly collapsed totally.

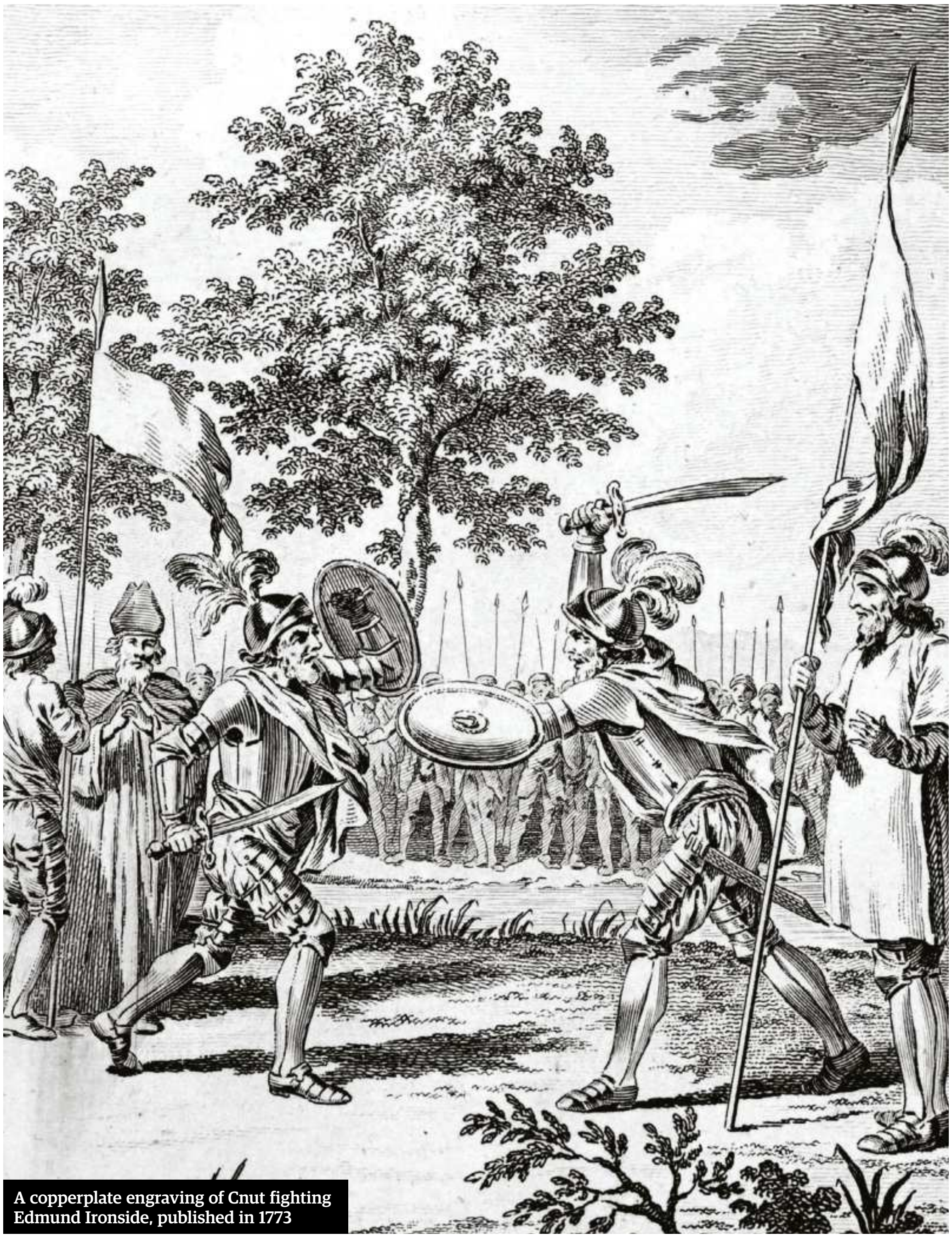
Olaf was forced to flee for his life, but he returned soon after in a vain attempt to reclaim the country. At his side was his half-brother Harald, who later – as Harald Hardrada ('the Ruthless') – was to become one of the most famous of all Vikings and would meet his end in a cataclysmic encounter at Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire in 1066. Olaf lost his life in the battle at Stiklestad. Olaf was a staunch Christian ruler and soon after his death was canonised. Saint Olaf would prove much more successful in death than King Olaf ever was in life.

But Cnut did not prove a success as king of Norway. He appointed his first wife, Ælfgifu, as his regent in the country along with their son, Sweyn. However, a disastrous famine undermined their position; this was a time of great suffering across much of the continent and not just in Scandinavia. Their rule was allegedly very harsh and there were a number of revolts that led to the collapse of Cnut's regime there. Olaf's son, Magnus, soon became king in his stead.

Norway was only ever a temporary part of Cnut's 'empire'. Perhaps the dispersed nature of the territories that Cnut ruled made them inherently hard to govern. Certainly the diversity of his subjects, and the relative 'newness' of all three core countries in it – England, Denmark and Norway – presented him with great challenges. It was a tough act for anyone to pull off and certainly there were indications that some of those around him, especially the sons who would have to run his territories after his death – and to a significant extent would be expected to do so when he was alive – were not up to the task, though there were as yet but young.

Cnut certainly had imperial pretensions. His visit to Rome made a great impact on him. He was so impressed at the grandeur and magnificence of the great Imperial Crown worn by Conrad II at his coronation that he had a replica made for himself. Letters back to England soon afterwards included several implicit imperial references – for example, when Cnut ostentatiously described himself as "King of England, Denmark, Norway [not at the time conquered] and part of Sweden". There was little doubt that Cnut had seen something of the magnificence and associated power that came from being an emperor that he took to modelling himself on one to a certain extent.

Yet, paradoxically, Cnut also became renowned for his humility. His great generosity to the Christian Church has already been mentioned, but his actions also won respect. On a visit to the north of England late in his reign, he walked five miles barefoot to visit the tomb of the revered Saint Cuthbert in Durham. Chroniclers of the time wrote of a man who was more monk than king. Although these attributes may have been exaggerated, as was common with the chroniclers of the time, this suggests a man who wanted to make a strong impression for his Christian acts.



A copperplate engraving of Cnut fighting Edmund Ironside, published in 1773

> "On a visit to the north of England late in his reign, he walked five miles barefoot to visit the tomb of the revered Saint Cuthbert"

Turning back the tide

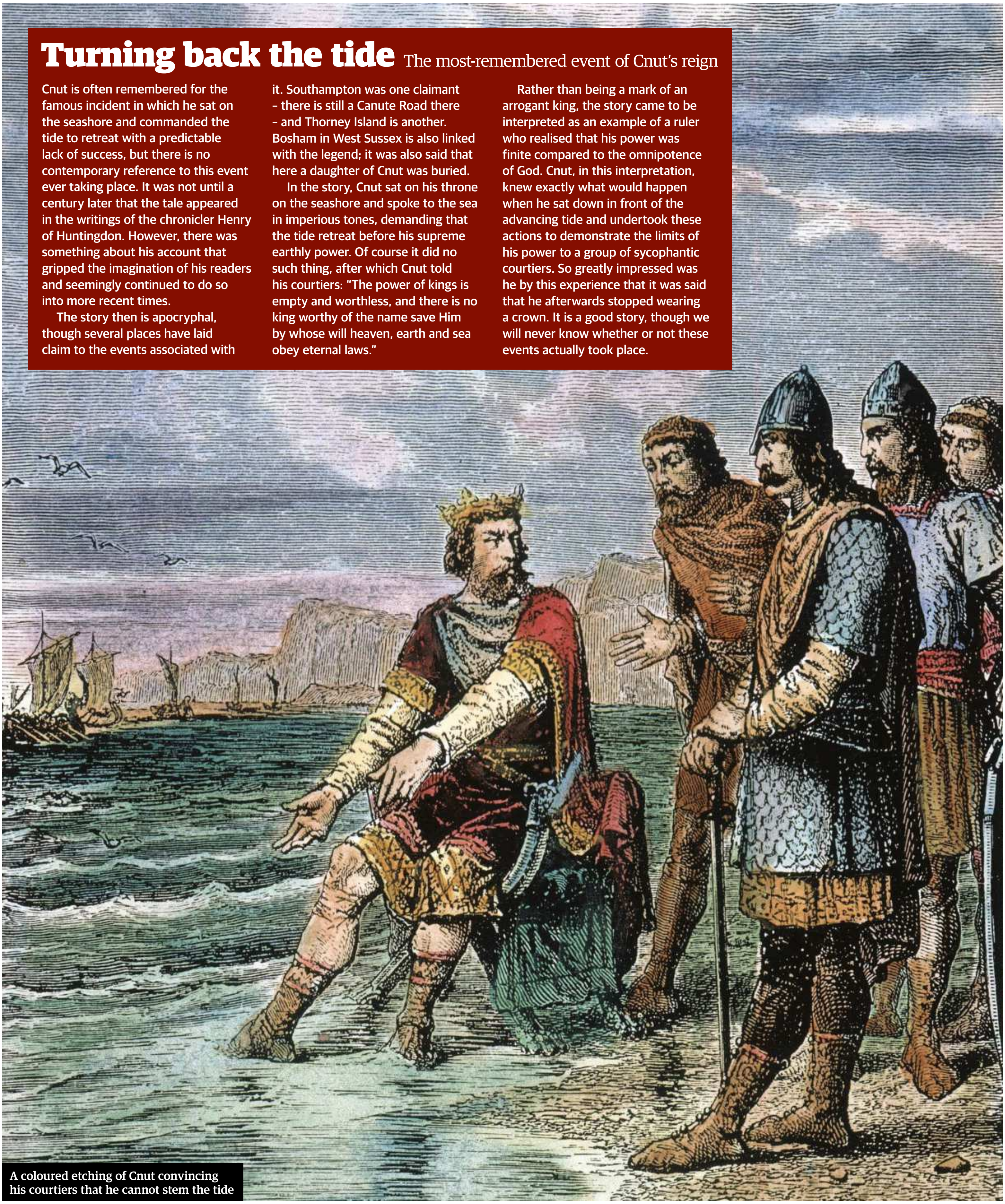
The most-remembered event of Cnut's reign

Cnut is often remembered for the famous incident in which he sat on the seashore and commanded the tide to retreat with a predictable lack of success, but there is no contemporary reference to this event ever taking place. It was not until a century later that the tale appeared in the writings of the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon. However, there was something about his account that gripped the imagination of his readers and seemingly continued to do so into more recent times.

The story then is apocryphal, though several places have laid claim to the events associated with it. Southampton was one claimant – there is still a Canute Road there – and Thorney Island is another. Bosham in West Sussex is also linked with the legend; it was also said that here a daughter of Cnut was buried.

In the story, Cnut sat on his throne on the seashore and spoke to the sea in imperious tones, demanding that the tide retreat before his supreme earthly power. Of course it did no such thing, after which Cnut told his courtiers: "The power of kings is empty and worthless, and there is no king worthy of the name save Him by whose will heaven, earth and sea obey eternal laws."

Rather than being a mark of an arrogant king, the story came to be interpreted as an example of a ruler who realised that his power was finite compared to the omnipotence of God. Cnut, in this interpretation, knew exactly what would happen when he sat down in front of the advancing tide and undertook these actions to demonstrate the limits of his power to a group of sycophantic courtiers. So greatly impressed was he by this experience that it was said that he afterwards stopped wearing a crown. It is a good story, though we will never know whether or not these events actually took place.



A coloured etching of Cnut convincing his courtiers that he cannot stem the tide

Images: Alamy (copperplate engraving), Topfoto (coloured etching)

This was an approach that was perhaps based as much on the political advantages that came from it as from any deeply held personal convictions. It made Cnut a 'modern' ruler, one who could sit at the high table of European politics as an equal rather than be regarded with suspicion by his fellow rulers as a potential raider.

This brought him great political benefits, and perhaps the most significant was his alliance with Conrad II. Denmark and the Holy Roman Empire shared a border - one that had been porous and problematic - but the alliance brought stability, enabling Cnut to concentrate his efforts on his unfinished business in Norway. Conrad's son married Cnut's daughter, Gunhilda - a sign of the great importance of Cnut in European affairs.

> "Cnut lived a very active life and it seems to have taken its toll"

Alongside this, Cnut appeared to retain other more 'Viking' characteristics. From what we know, he was a lover of the sagas every bit as much as more traditional Scandinavian rulers had been before him. He himself appears in Viking sagas, though reflecting these extraordinary changing times the heroes here were now typically Christian rather than followers of Odin or Thor. This was a sure sign that the world was changing rapidly, though some parts of Scandinavia would stay stubbornly pagan well beyond the period covered by Cnut's reign. For example, Uppsala in Sweden was long a centre of worship for the old gods and half a century after Cnut's death the Christian writer Adam of Bremen was writing of the horrific rites of animal and human sacrifice that were still practised there.

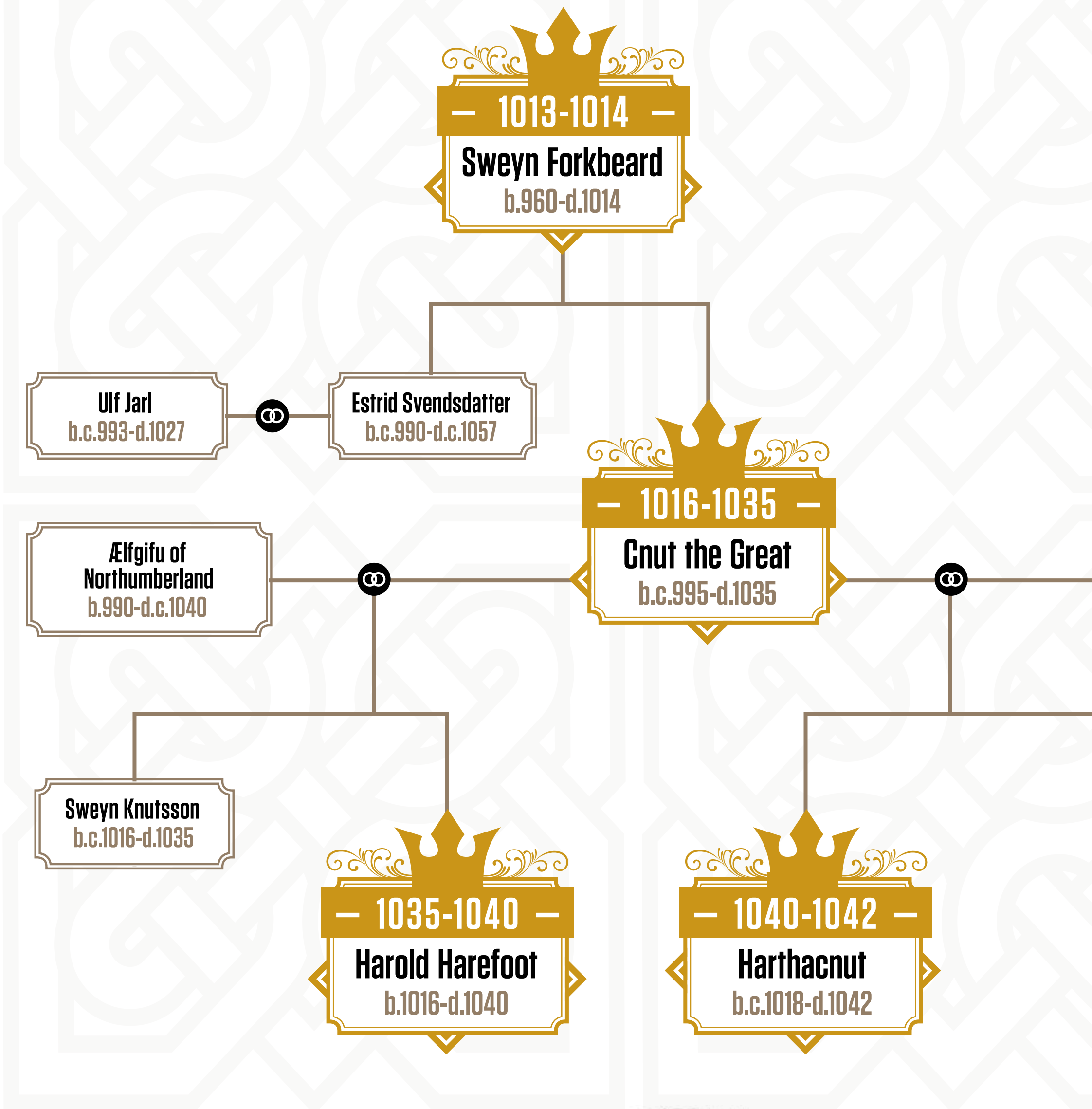
However, Cnut lived a very active life and it seems to have taken its toll. There are a few hints that he was suffering from some illness that was wearing him down and on 12 November 1035 he breathed his last at Shaftesbury in Dorset. The place of his death is symbolically interesting as the tomb of the martyred English king and saint, Edward resided there. Throughout his life, Cnut had acted with great respect towards the English royal family that he had replaced. He, as we have seen, emphasised his appreciation of the late, great Edgar by adopting his laws. He even visited the tomb of Edmund Ironside at Glastonbury Abbey where he left behind a splendid gift of cloak adorned with peacock feathers, a symbol of both Imperial Byzantine grandeur and Christian resurrection.

His magnanimity marked him out as a wise man, able to build bridges with the people that he had conquered. Although he taxed his people heavily, they, for their part, seem to have accepted his right to rule them; he did at least give them peace and security, a welcome contrast to the four decades that preceded his reign. He was generally regarded by them with respect rather than love. But it was a welcome breathing space after the trauma of the reign of Æthelred 'the Unready'.

Cnut was buried in the great Anglo-Saxon royal mausoleum in Winchester. Here he metaphorically rubbed shoulders with other English kings and saints. In its own way it was another sign of a king who wished to assimilate rather than dictate to his English subjects. Ironically Cnut's bones were not to find peace in death. In the 16th century, his remains, and those of his wife, Emma, were packed together into a mortuary chest and placed high in the presbytery of Winchester Cathedral.

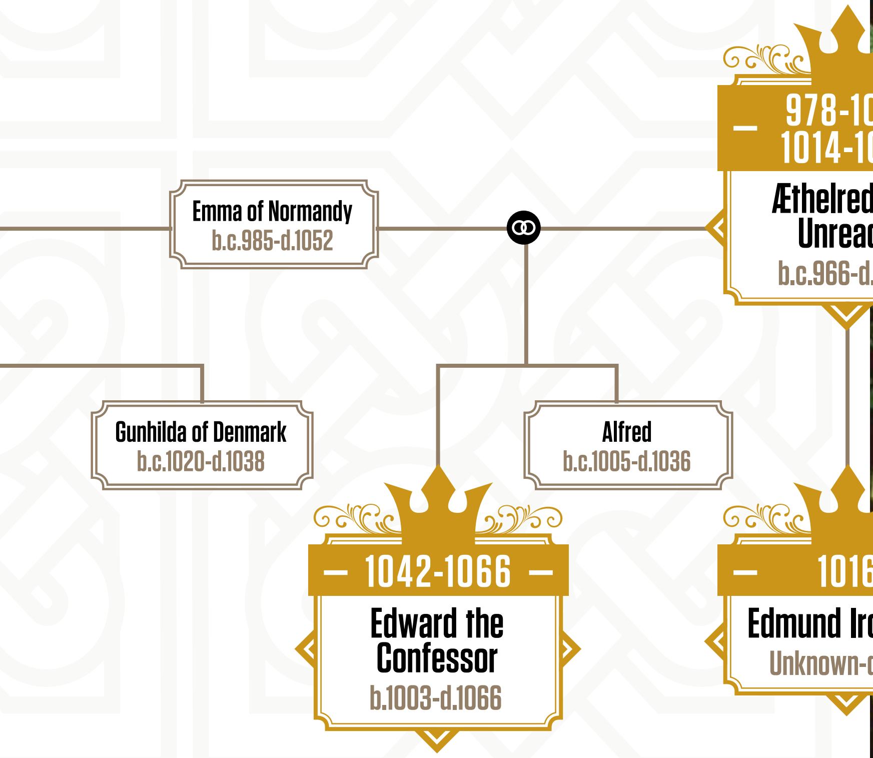
England's Viking overlords

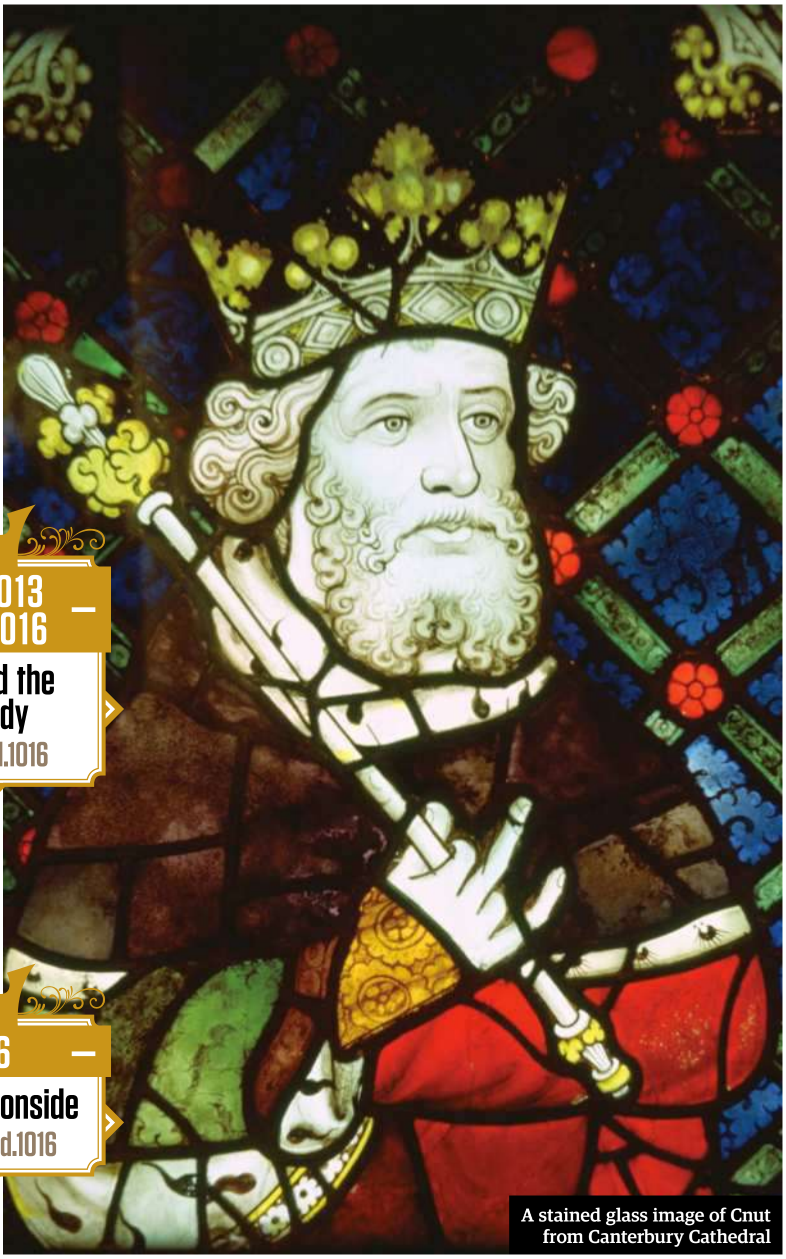
Discover the lineage of England's Viking rulers



The obverse (front) of a silver penny of King Cnut, dated c.1017-23

> “Cnut was the only king to ever rule both England and Denmark. He managed England’s great wealth to full advantage”




A stained glass image of Cnut from Canterbury Cathedral

When Winchester Cathedral was entered by Parliamentarian forces in the great English Civil War of the 17th century, anti-monarchist soldiers broke open the chests and used the leg bones to shatter the splendid stained glass of the West Window. Following the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660 after the fall of the Commonwealth, the bones were gathered together and placed in the mortuary chests once more, but by this time they were hopelessly jumbled up; no one knew who went where. At the time of writing, a temporary laboratory has been set up in Winchester Cathedral to try and match the right bones with the right mortuary chests so that Cnut and Emma can once more rest side by side in peace.

The greatness of Cnut’s achievements in building an extended kingdom that encompassed both England and Scandinavia can perhaps best be demonstrated by how quickly his ‘empire’ began to fall apart after his death. Without his great energy, vision and drive, his successors were incapable of keeping it together. Harold Harefoot, his son from his union with Ælfgifu of Northampton, and Harthacnut, from his marriage with Emma, both became king in due course, but neither lasted for very long, nor gave any indication that, had they lived, they would have actually been very successful monarchs.

Harold became the sole ruler of England after Cnut’s death, but he died himself soon after. As a result, Harthacnut then became king, but he too did not survive very long, dying after overindulging at a wedding feast. With none of Cnut’s sons now living, in 1042 the throne reverted back to the Anglo-Saxon bloodline when Edward ‘the Confessor’ became sovereign. He was able to trace his ancestry back to the line of Cerdic of Wessex, a 6th-century ruler who claimed descent from both Adam of biblical fame and the Germanic/Norse god Woden/Odin. In a somewhat diluted form, after several diversions across the centuries that have followed, traces of that bloodline still remain in today’s British royal family.

Cnut was the only king to ever rule both England and Denmark (if we were to exclude the short reign of Harthacnut). He capably governed both, dextrously managing England’s great wealth to full advantage and emulating some of the most significant elements of government to build a strong nation-state in Denmark. He used English churchmen to help build the young Church in Denmark as well as using more practical tools such as the employment of English moneyers to develop Danish coinage.

It would be true to say that the practical results of King Cnut’s leadership were more deeply felt in the long run in Denmark than England, but his reign was nonetheless a fascinating period in English and European history and a remarkable achievement in its own right.

Images: York Museums Trust, Yorkshire Museum CC BY-SA 4.0 (penny), Getty Images (stained glass)

The Last Viking King

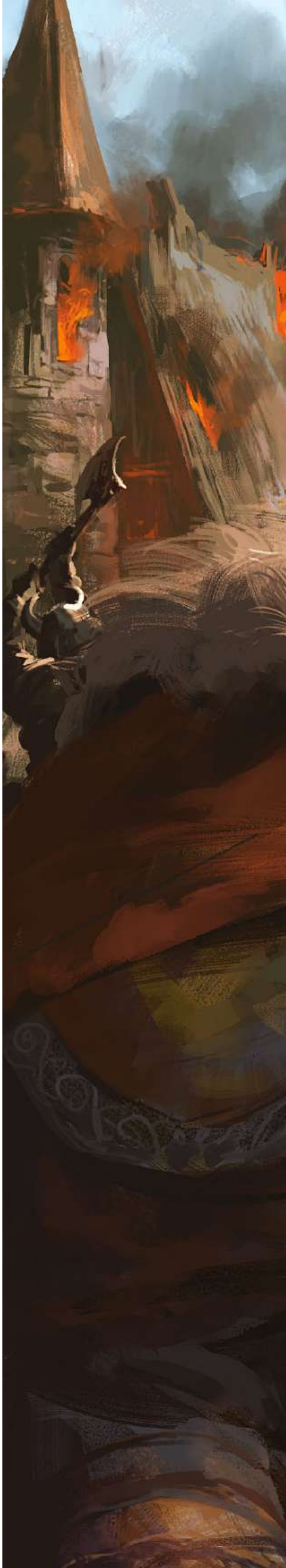
With the Viking Age setting in the west, one man set out to reclaim the lands, power and culture of his forefathers. His name was Harald Hardrada, and this is his story

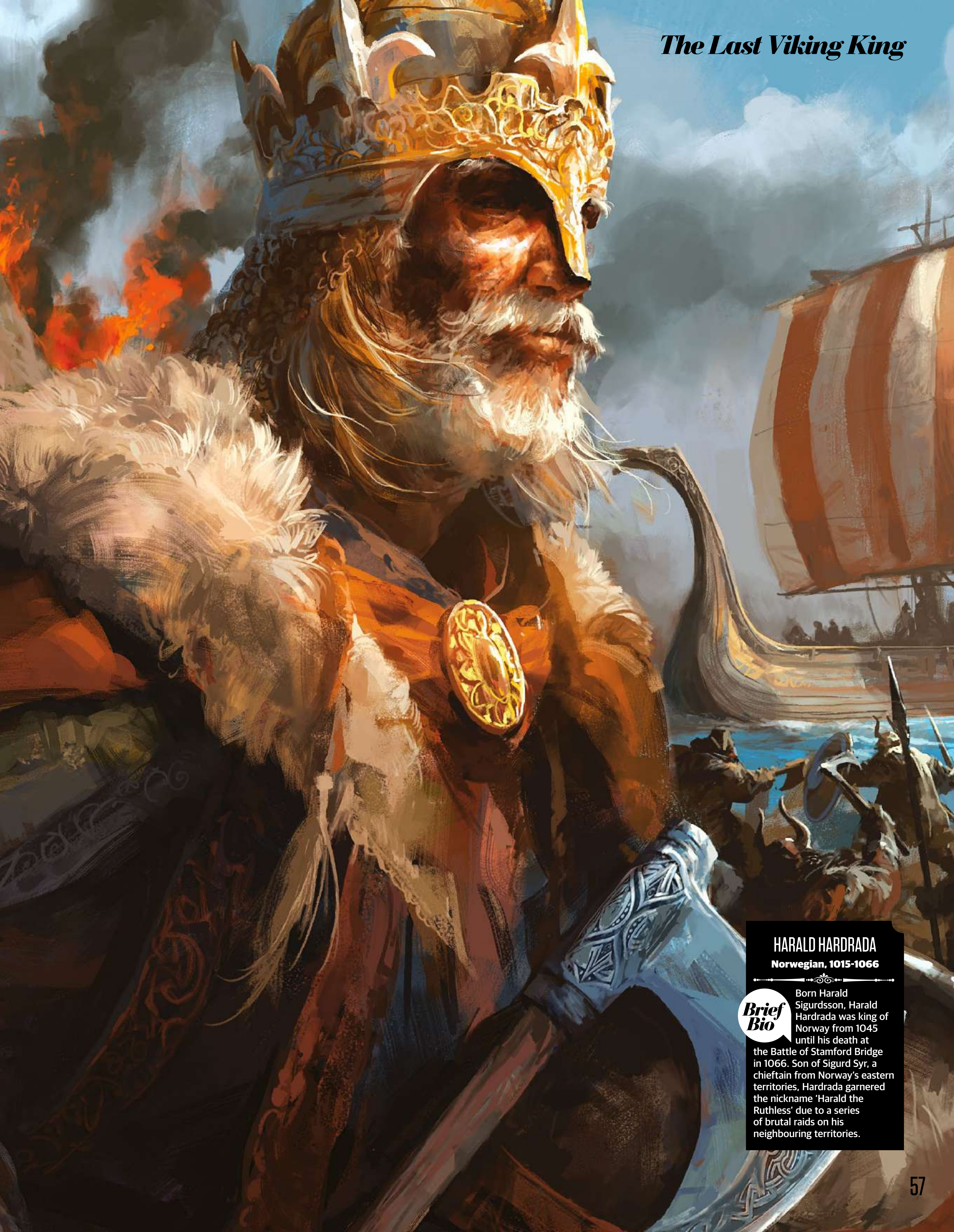
Written by Robert Jones

Conqueror, exile, mercenary and warlord; Harald Hardrada was many things during his bloody, brutal and eventful life. However, he was one thing above all others: a Viking. Descended, according to Scandinavian saga, from the legendary first ever king of Norway, Harald Fairhair, Hardrada – named due to his style for 'hard rule' – came from a long line of war-loving Viking rulers who each, much to the terror of large swathes of Europe, had ravaged, pillaged and ransacked with a frequency that was previously unimaginable. The culture, landscape and language of Europe had irrevocably been altered by the Age of the Vikings, and Hardrada, born into one of its noble institutions, was brought up to be totally wrapped in its ideals and indoctrinated into a mindset the likes of which had seen the nations of Scandinavia dominate the known world for almost 300 years.

It was this in-built, centuries-old lust for war and conquest that saw Hardrada engage in his first ever battle in 1030, a mere 15 years after his birth in Ringerike, Norway. Hardrada's brother Olaf Haraldsson had been forced into exile in 1028 after the Danish king Cnut the Great had taken the Norwegian throne for himself. However, upon Olaf's return in 1030, Hardrada drummed up the support of 600 men from the Norwegian Uplands and joined with Olaf to take down Cnut. As such, on 29 July 1030 Hardrada took the fight to the Danish at the Battle of Stiklestad, fighting with his brother for control of his ancestors' country.

> Harald's nickname was well given: it means 'hard rule' or 'stern ruler', which sums up his reign perfectly





HARALD HARDRADA

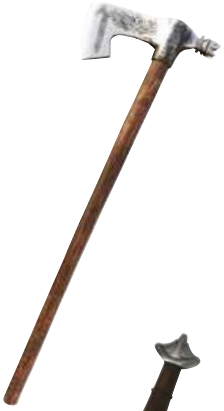
Norwegian, 1015-1066

Brief Bio

Born Harald Sigurdsson, Harald Hardrada was king of Norway from 1045 until his death at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. Son of Sigurd Syr, a chieftain from Norway's eastern territories, Hardrada garnered the nickname 'Harald the Ruthless' due to a series of brutal raids on his neighbouring territories.

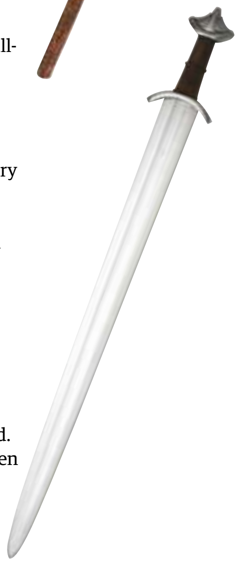
Viking weapons

Battleaxe



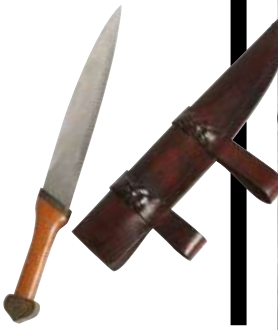
The axe was the primary weapon for all the Scandinavian cultures of the Viking Age, with a multitude of designs used between nations with differing shafts and heads. One of the most popular designs was the Daneaxe, a large two-handed weapon with long shaft and crescent-shaped wrought iron head. Often the axe head would be granted a steel cutting edge, a factor that helped it generate skull-splitting force.

Sword



If a Viking carried a sword then it would be his primary weapon. The problem was that swords were more expensive to produce than axes, and so were only carried by the rich and powerful. Viking swords were 90 centimetres in length and took a Roman spatha-like design, with a tight grip, long fuller and no pronounced cross-guard. Hilts and handles were often inlaid with jewels or unique inscriptions.

Dagger



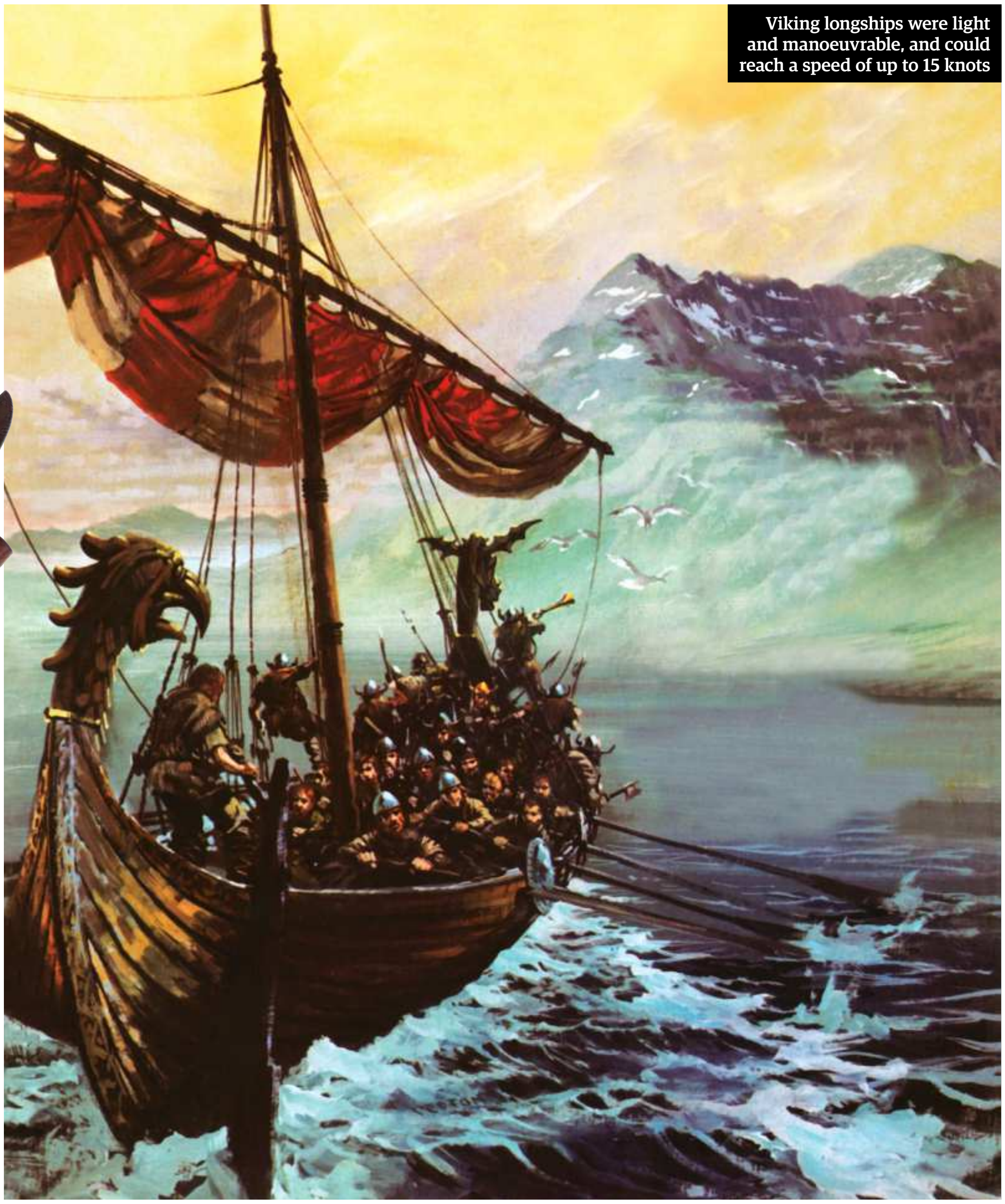
The standard secondary weapon for each Viking warrior, the dagger was an incredibly versatile weapon, granting an element of speed to the Viking's otherwise slow armament. In particular, the seax was a popular model that consisted of a symmetrical straight blade of various lengths with a smooth, wooden hilt. Seax daggers such as this could also be used for skinning animals and carving.

Unfortunately, despite showing considerable military might on the battlefield, Hardrada was defeated by the far larger Danish army, with Olaf being killed in the fighting. Hardrada barely escaped with his life, having been badly wounded in the melee. In fact, were it not for the covert help of his friend Rögnvald Brusason – the future earl of Orkney – Hardrada would never have reached the remote farmstead in eastern Norway that he did a few weeks after the battle, nor been able to recover from his serious wounds.

A month went by, and with each passing day the reality of what had occurred became all the more apparent to Hardrada. He had let down his brother, father, nation and revered forefathers. He had been defeated at the first hurdle, part-crippled by a foreign invader that remained in control of his country. Unable to bear the guilt any longer, one month after his defeat Hardrada exiled himself to Sweden, journeying north over the mountains by the cover of darkness.

Over the following year little is known of Hardrada's movements or activities, with not even the sagas of old recalling what transpired. All that is known today is that almost a year to the day after his defeat at Stiklestad, Hardrada arrived in the town of Staraya Ladoga in the Kievan Rus region of northeastern Europe. The Kievan people were a wild bunch of Slavic tribes renowned for their hardiness, combat prowess and expertise in trade, with their geographical position placing them very much at the gates between the largely Byzantine-controlled east and the Scandinavian-occupied west. So when Hardrada emerged from the wilderness in 1031, his ancestry and prowess in combat saw him warmly welcomed by the Rus' ruler Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise, whose wife Ingegerd was a distant relative of his.

Badly in need of military commanders and recognising Harald's ability in combat, Yaroslav immediately made Hardrada leader of his forces and dispatched him to the western border to fight



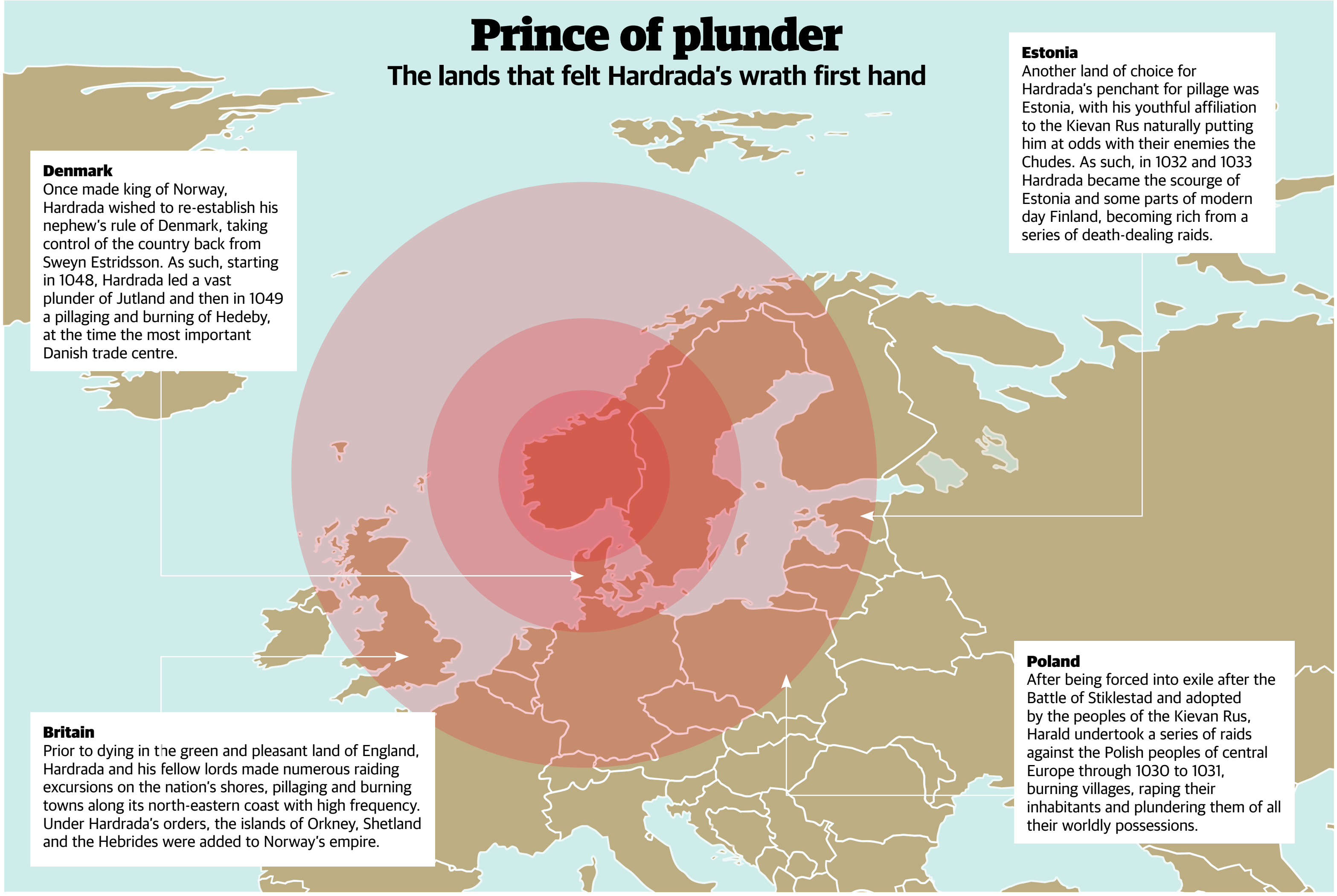
Viking longships were light and manoeuvrable, and could reach a speed of up to 15 knots

War of words

While it is true that Hardrada's reign was characterised by raiding, war and blood, he was also reportedly a sound diplomat and economist, and used his skills to bring a period of stability to Norway when much of Scandinavia was in turmoil. Two of the most notable examples of the king's ability to expand his empire by words rather than axe are, firstly, his arrangement of new international trade routes and deals – a decision that brought in much wealth to Norway, with deals struck with the Kievan Rus and the vast Byzantine Empire – and, secondly, his dissemination of Christianity throughout the lands of Norway. Indeed, Hardrada had been converted early to Christianity, and upon becoming king of Norway he implemented many policies geared towards promoting it – be that through direct communication or via the construction of churches and the reparation of existing ones.

Prince of plunder

The lands that felt Hardrada's wrath first hand



Denmark
Once made king of Norway, Hardrada wished to re-establish his nephew's rule of Denmark, taking control of the country back from Sweyn Estridsson. As such, starting in 1048, Hardrada led a vast plunder of Jutland and then in 1049 a pillaging and burning of Hedeby, at the time the most important Danish trade centre.

Estonia
Another land of choice for Hardrada's penchant for pillage was Estonia, with his youthful affiliation to the Kievan Rus naturally putting him at odds with their enemies the Chudes. As such, in 1032 and 1033 Hardrada became the scourge of Estonia and some parts of modern day Finland, becoming rich from a series of death-dealing raids.

Britain
Prior to dying in the green and pleasant land of England, Hardrada and his fellow lords made numerous raiding excursions on the nation's shores, pillaging and burning towns along its north-eastern coast with high frequency. Under Hardrada's orders, the islands of Orkney, Shetland and the Hebrides were added to Norway's empire.

Poland
After being forced into exile after the Battle of Stiklestad and adopted by the peoples of the Kievan Rus, Harald undertook a series of raids against the Polish peoples of central Europe through 1030 to 1031, burning villages, raping their inhabitants and plundering them of all their worldly possessions.

the Polish peoples at war with the Rus. The faith Yaroslav placed in Harald's breeding was well founded, with the warrior completing a crushing campaign against Poland, slaughtering hundreds and thousands of Poles and driving them back into their country's distant heartlands. Following this victory, Yaroslav left Hardrada to engage the Chude peoples of Estonia and the Pechenegs nomads that had been fighting on and off with the Rus for decades, with similar and horrific results. Hardrada was reportedly demonic on the battlefield, driven by some seemingly unnatural force in pursuit of his enemy's blood, transcending into a berserker state that no man could oppose.

These victories for the Rus saw Hardrada gain a fearsome reputation, with a band of 500 men pledging their loyalty to him. Hardrada and his band of mercenary warriors were now the most feared fighting force in Europe and, after securing the Kievan territories in 1033, they set off in a quest for fame and riches heading south to Constantinople, the capital city of the fabulously wealthy Byzantine Empire. Arriving there in 1034 and immediately introducing himself to the Byzantine emperor Michael IV, Hardrada and his men were immediately employed in the emperor's Varangian Guard, an elite fighting force controlled directly by the ruler. In theory, the Varangian Guard were supposed to simply protect the emperor, but due to Hardrada's desire for battle he was soon fighting on almost every front of the empire.

From Arab pirates in the Mediterranean to rebel forces amassed in Sicily and onto Arab strongholds throughout Asia Minor, Hardrada became the scourge of any Byzantine enemy. He was deployed like a rampaging bull on the battlefield, one that could seemingly not be killed in combat no matter how far the odds were stacked in his opponents' favour. Returning back to Constantinople in 1041, Hardrada was now famed not just for his battle prowess, but also for his immense wealth, with almost seven years worth of plunder being amassed into a vast fortune that rivalled that of many kings. Indeed, Hardrada had raided so much that he had to send large portions of his loot back to Yaroslav for safekeeping

> Harald was among one of the Viking Age's most well-travelled warriors, spending time in Europe and Asia

Three ruthless victories

Asia Minor campaign 1035

Following his joining of the Byzantine Varangian Guard, Hardrada was dispatched to Asia Minor to put down a widespread piratical Arab uprising. A series of running battles continued in which Harald pushed the Arab forces back into mainland Asia. Following this initial success, Hardrada led a search and destroy operation deep into the Asia Minor, slaughtering thousands and taking over 80 Arab strongholds.

Battle of Ostrovo 1041

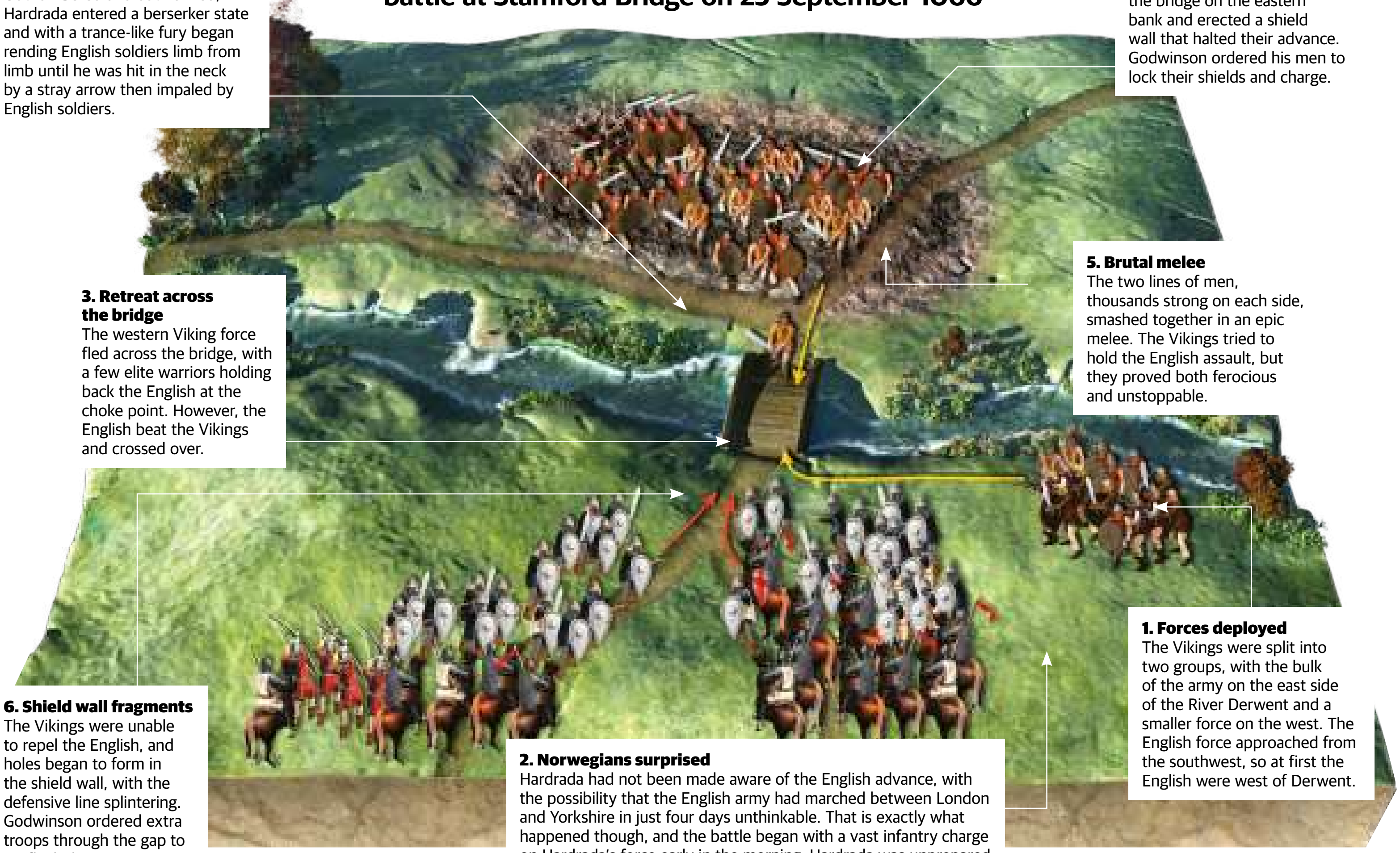
While the leader of the Varangian Guard, Hardrada led the Byzantine forces against a Bulgarian army in Greece. In 1040 Peter Delyan, a native Bulgarian, led an uprising against Byzantine rule and declared himself king. Hardrada killed his foe, crushed his forces in battle and re-suppressed Bulgaria to such an extent that it remained under Byzantine rule for another 145 years.

Battle of Fulford 1066

Hardrada's last great victory, the Battle of Fulford saw him land in England and defeat northern Earls Edwin and Morcar of York in a battle involving over 15,000 soldiers. Harald's masterstroke was positioning his troops so he could absorb the heavy English infantry charge before countering down his right flank and breaking the enemy's lines. This won him the city of York.

Hardrada's last hurrah

Follow the events of the last Viking king's final battle at Stamford Bridge on 25 September 1066



1. Forces deployed
The Vikings were split into two groups, with the bulk of the army on the east side of the River Derwent and a smaller force on the west. The English force approached from the southwest, so at first the English were west of Derwent.

2. Norwegians surprised
Hardrada had not been made aware of the English advance, with the possibility that the English army had marched between London and Yorkshire in just four days unthinkable. That is exactly what happened though, and the battle began with a vast infantry charge on Hardrada's force early in the morning. Hardrada was unprepared and completely overrun.

3. Retreat across the bridge
The western Viking force fled across the bridge, with a few elite warriors holding back the English at the choke point. However, the English beat the Vikings and crossed over.

4. Shield wall formed
Hardrada mobilised his army, which descended towards the bridge on the eastern bank and erected a shield wall that halted their advance. Godwinson ordered his men to lock their shields and charge.

5. Brutal melee
The two lines of men, thousands strong on each side, smashed together in an epic melee. The Vikings tried to hold the English assault, but they proved both ferocious and unstoppable.

6. Shield wall fragments
The Vikings were unable to repel the English, and holes began to form in the shield wall, with the defensive line splintering. Godwinson ordered extra troops through the gap to outflank the enemy.

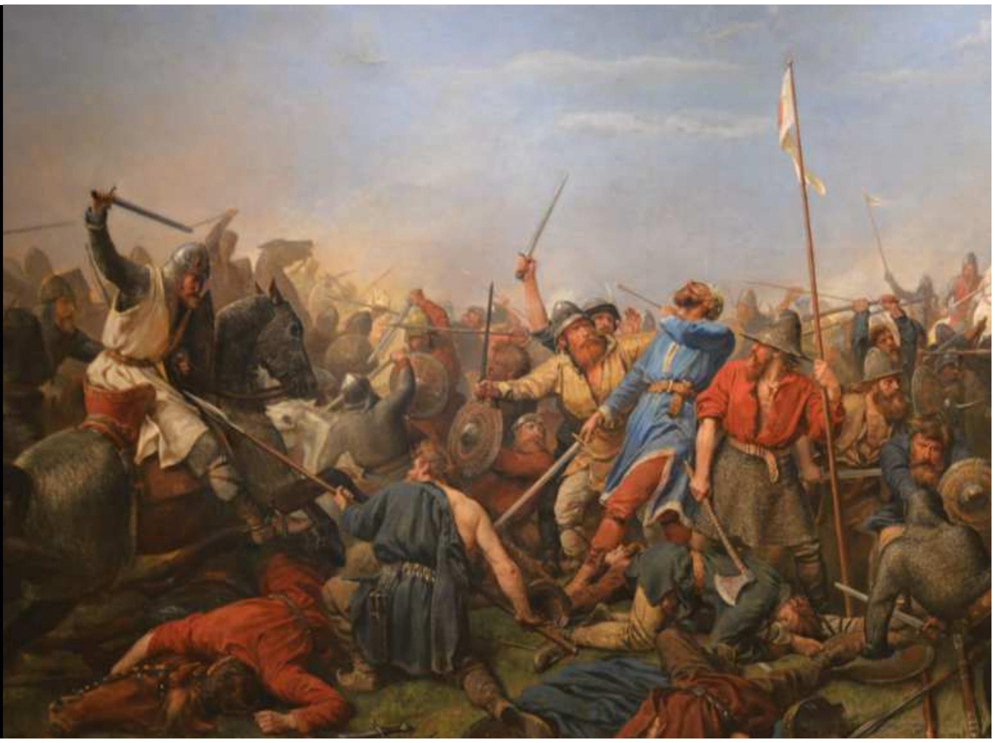
7. Hardrada falls
Outnumbered and out-flanked, Hardrada entered a berserker state and with a trance-like fury began rending English soldiers limb from limb until he was hit in the neck by a stray arrow then impaled by English soldiers.

Life after Harold

Despite a succession of other Norwegian and Scandinavian kings following Hardrada's death, none of them truly had Viking blood, and the Viking Age ended as abruptly as it had begun 300 years previously. Far from the war-loving, plundering and raiding mentality that won the Vikings almost all of northern Europe and 300 years of world history, these successors had neither the will nor the military might to maintain the Viking Age and their way of life, with Scandinavian influence subsiding and gradually becoming subsumed into wider European culture over the following decades.

For example, Hardrada's successor was Magnus Haraldsson, who was left king regent upon Harold's departure for England. However, after only reigning for three peaceful and uneventful years, he died, possibly of ergotism, leaving his brother Olaf III to take the crown, who proceeded to rule Norway until his death in 1093. However, while his rule was long, it was not Viking, with the king renouncing any offensive foreign policies and diverting funds to the defence of Norwegian borders. This pattern of defensive and peaceful rulers continued, with the only combat experienced being that of the civil wars of the 12th and 13th centuries.

The domination of Viking culture had come crashing down with Hardrada's defeat at Stamford Bridge and Europe was now entering a new, more peaceful and civilised age. For Hardrada, in his last glorious stand, had being fighting on the razor's edge of a more savage time, one that saw the lands, language and laws of Europe changed forever. The last true Viking king was dead, and with him, so too the Viking Age.



– no boat was capable of carrying the sheer weight of the bountiful precious metals and jewels.

While Hardrada's position under Michael IV was unassailable, in December 1041 he quickly fell out of favour, becoming caught up in the middle of a war of succession. Realising that his position was never going to be same again, Hardrada escaped a now turbulent Constantinople just months later, returning by boat through the Black Sea to the Kievan Rus. Upon returning to a rapturous welcome from Yaroslav, Hardrada promptly married the latter's daughter Ellisif and, for a short time, settled down in the Kievan capital, engaging in little combat and remaining in the Rus for a further three years.

However, as the days and years dragged by, Hardrada was still tormented by his defeat at Sticklestad. He hadn't set foot in his native Norway for almost 15 years and, despite his vast riches and subsequent victories, was haunted by the legacy that had been left to him by his ancestors. Norway, he decided, must be returned once more to Norwegian hands. Setting forth from Novgorod in early 1045, Hardrada journeyed back to the country of his birth, arriving in Sweden once more later on in the year. Here, Hardrada received excellent news: Norway was already back in Norwegian hands, with the illegitimate son of Olaf, Magnus the Good, sitting securely on the throne. Apparently, Cnut the Great's sons had abandoned Hardrada's much-loved Norway, and were currently fighting for control of England.

Hardrada set off immediately to Norway and, after arriving in 1046 and negotiating with Magnus directly, struck a deal that he would jointly rule the country in exchange for half of his immense wealth. For the next two years, both Magnus and Harald ruled Norway, holding separate courts and rarely meeting. Hardrada now had everything he could want, owning much land, ruling his country and being fabulously wealthy too.

However, after two years of supposedly living an ideal life, the Viking blood in Hardrada's veins called once more, leading him into a campaign of revenge against Denmark for the death of his brother and the pillaging of his ancestral lands. As such, in 1048 Hardrada plundered Jutland, pillaged and burned Hedeby – the most important Danish trade centre in the entire country – and launched a colossal naval assault on the Danish royal pretender Sweyn Estridsson. This battle was the infamous Battle of Niså, and saw Hardrada lead 300 ships against Sweyn in a conflict that left many ships on both sides 'empty'.

Despite defeating Sweyn at Niså and successfully launching multiple Viking raids on Denmark over the next six years, Hardrada never did take the Danish throne he craved, and due to lack of finances was forced to begrudgingly declare peace with him in 1064. Now recognising that he would never reclaim the Danish throne as his own, Hardrada shifted his attentions towards another rich and historic land.

England had been controlled by Cnut the Great's son Harthacnut until 1042, when he died childless. As such, the Anglo-Saxon Edward the Confessor had crowned himself king in his absence and proceeded to rule the island nation for over 20 years. When Hardrada heard in early 1066 that Edward had died on 5 January, he immediately decided to launch one more glorious Viking conquest. Now 50, Hardrada must have knew that his time on Earth was coming to an end and, before he passed on to the afterlife to meet his hallowed ancestors, he needed to succumb once more to the call of his blood.

For the native English who witnessed the approach of 300 longships and 15,000 men on 8 September 1066 in northeast England, it must have felt like observing the coming of the apocalypse. The force was one of the greatest Viking armies ever to be assembled, and if unopposed, it would bring the nation to its knees. Stepping forth on English soil, Hardrada could taste the coming war, and after just 12 days he was not to be disappointed when he crushed a 5,000-strong subsidiary English force crushed at the Battle of Fulford.

Hardrada's English victory was short-lived – in less than a week his troops were outflanked by Anglo-Saxon forces

Striding through the English dead, finally back in his element after years of inactivity and luxury, little did Hardrada know that this was to be his last victory. Just five days later, his army was surprised by the fierce force of the now English king Harold Godwinson, who marched over 180 miles in four days to meet with the Viking warlord at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. It was a battle that would end Hardrada and, as history shows, have a profound effect on the course of England and Europe going forward.

Mere weeks after defeating Hardrada at Stamford Bridge, Godwinson himself would too be defeated by the Norman duke William, in large part due to troop exhaustion from the combat and enforced marching to and from York. As such, the duke became King William I, the Conqueror, and instigated a centuries-long period of Norman rule over England, radically transforming its economy, language, architecture, law and education. Indeed, by the time the Norman presence in England had finally dissipated, the Medieval age had long since transformed into the Renaissance, and its new, intoxicating culture, religion and science had swept away much of Europe's once-strong Viking presence.

When Harald Hardrada was struck his fatal blow on the battlefield in England, it was more than just the flame of one great life being extinguished; it would prove to be the death of the last Viking warrior king.

Hardrada's lineage

Great-great-grandfather
Harald Fairhair

850 – 932

Noted by many historians to be the first king of Norway, Fairhair became a legendary figure during the Viking Age, with his deeds relayed in numerous epic sagas. He supposedly won many battles against Norwegian opponents on his way to becoming the country's ruler, and famously had anywhere between 11 and 20 sons.

Great-grandfather/grandfather
Halfdan Sigurdsson of Hadafylke

935 – 995

Little is known about Hardrada's grandfather, other than that he was supposedly Halfdan Sigurdsson, the alleged son of King Sigurd Hrise of Norway, Hardrada's great-grandfather. Both Hrise's and Halfdan's lineage is unconfirmed, with only information passed down from Icelandic sagas mentioning their link to Harald.

Father
Sigurd Syr

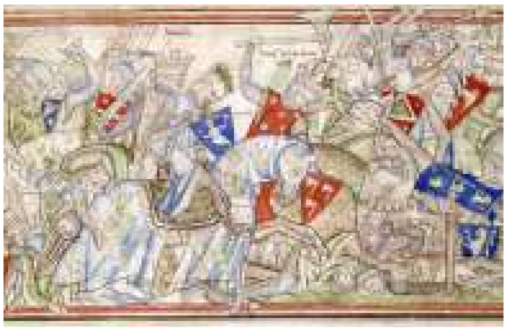
970 – 1018

According to Icelandic sagas, Syr was a prudent and modest man who was known for hands-on approach to the management of his lands and properties. Records also indicate that he was a wealthy man, and that in 998 he chose to be baptised with his wife into the Christian faith.

Nephew
Magnus Olafsson

1024 – 1047

At times king of both Norway and Denmark, Hardrada's nephew Magnus garnered the nickname 'the Good'. He was crowned sovereign of Norway at 11 and then of Denmark at 18, ruling both lands until his mysterious death aged 23. Upon his death the kingdoms were split, with Hardrada taking the Norwegian crown, and Sweyn Estridsson the Danish.



LOST KINGDOMS OF THE VIKINGS

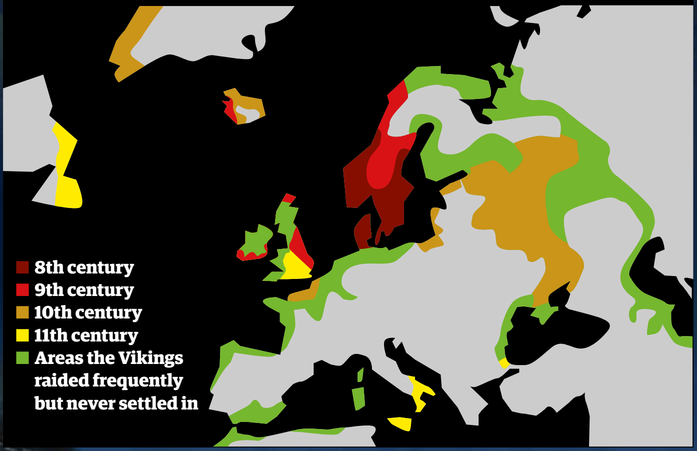
From Canada to Constantinople, the Norse raiders pillaged and plundered the known world in search of treasure and territory

Written by Jack Griffiths

Often portrayed as bloodthirsty raiders, the Vikings were a civilisation that travelled to more of the Early Medieval world than anyone else. Originating from Scandinavia, they branched out into mainland Europe to find food, land and riches, establishing kingdoms across the known world. For hundreds of years a fleet of longships on the horizon struck fear into the hearts of European peoples like the Franks, Saxons and Byzantines. The men from the north were traders as well as raiders, though, and commerce helped fund their lengthy expeditions. Bringing with them fur, wool and whalebone, they traded their goods for silver, silk and spices, which they then sold on. To trade or raid? It all hinged on the best way to make profit.

The Vikings are perhaps most famous for their attacks on the British Isles, the forced establishment of the Danelaw and battles against Alfred the Great. However, they sailed their longships all across Europe and ruled over many diverse lands. They even made forays into parts of Asia, America and Africa. From Newfoundland in the west to Kiev in the east, the Norsemen braved treacherous oceans and faced deadly adversaries. They may have seemed like savages, but it's the Norsemen we have to thank for the establishment and development of many of the European kingdoms that flourished after their decline.

Viking expansion



IRELAND

For more than 200 years the Vikings exerted influence over vast swathes of the Emerald Isle

Norwegian Norsemen first appeared in Ireland at the end of the 8th century with a hit-and-run attack on a monastery on either Rathlin or Lambay Island. These sporadic coastal attacks continued for 30 years, and despite later spreading to the mainland, actually had no great effect on the Irish settlements that would rebuild during the lulls in fighting. At this stage, the marauders were content with staging assaults that lasted no longer than a few days before returning to Scandinavia to sell their spoils. At the start of the next century, however, the Vikings grew in confidence and the pillaging intensified. Ship enclosures (known as longphorts) were established in Dublin, and these fixed positions allowed the raiders to ravage the countryside at will. It wasn't long until Irish kings had had enough. The king of Tara, Máel Seachnaill, took the fight back to the Vikings, and near Skreen in County Meath, killed no less than 700 Nordic raiders.

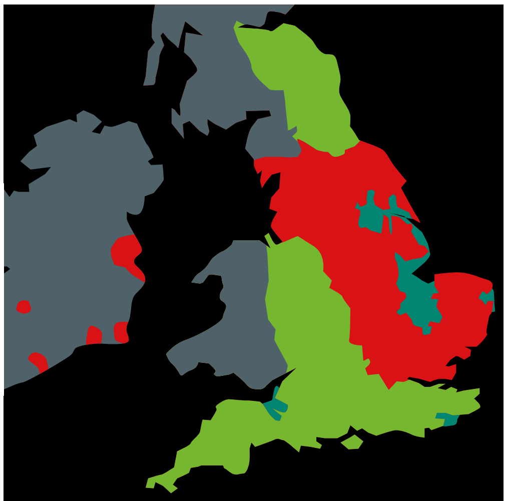
The increase in assaults had a profound effect on the Celtic-Irish society for more than two centuries. Norse-Irish alliances became common, but by the start of the 10th century, Vikings from Denmark were added to the mix. To differentiate, Vikings from Norway were known as the 'Lochlainn' and the Danish Norsemen as the 'Danair'. The Viking success on the British Isles only increased the number of attacks, and in the years leading up to 1000, they tactically used their longships to travel up rivers and attack further inland. The Norwegians dominated initially, financed by all the monasteries they plundered, but the disorganised nature of their attacks meant the Danes' power base grew steadily.

On the Irish side, one man rose above the others, the king of Munster, Brian Boru. With his support base in the southern kingdom, Brian assembled a unified confederate army, which imposed itself as the major force in the region. The army destroyed Dublin's fortress, allied with many of the Viking leaders and was even powerful enough to expel several Norse clans from Ireland entirely. Brian claimed kingship in league with the Dublin Norse, and no one dared challenge him. His supremacy lasted until 1012, when a series of intense Viking attacks culminated in the critical Battle of Clontarf in 1014.

Taking place on 23 April, Clontarf was a battle between the majority of the Irish kingdoms led by Brian against Vikings supported by Máel Mórda, the king of Leinster, who had switched allegiances after a dispute. Brian had approximately 7,000 troops at his disposal, and they marched to Dublin to engage 4,000 Leinster men and 3,000 Norsemen who had landed on the shoreline at sunrise. As the armies brawled, Mórda's men scored an early advantage as his vicious Viking centre proved devastatingly effective. The pendulum swung in the other direction, however, when the Viking champions Brodir and Sigurd were defeated. As afternoon came, Brian's men managed to cut off the Viking access to their longships. This was a critical blow to Morda's forces, who began to flee towards the one bridge over the nearby River Liffey to safety. As they tried to escape, the returning Máel Seachnaill and his men emerged and cut off access to the bridge. The Vikings and the Leinster men were now trapped and subsequently routed.

The battle was the bloodiest single conflict in ancient Irish history. Brian lay dead in the mud with 4,000 of his own men and, crucially, 6,000 Leinster men and Vikings lay slaughtered alongside them. The battle resulted in the end of a period of great turmoil in Ireland and initiated a time of relative peace in which the Irish and the remaining Vikings lived together. The Norsemen who stayed in Ireland were absorbed into Irish culture and started to intermarry. The Danish kingdom of Dublin had stood for more than 200 years prior to Clontarf, but just 52 years later, Harald Hardrada would lose at Stamford Bridge and the great Viking age of the British Isles would be over.

Historic Viking settlements can be easily identified by '-by' and '-thorpe' suffixes, which in Old Norse meant homestead and farm. Therefore, cities and towns such as Derby, Grimsby, Whitby and Scunthorpe were once Nordic settlements.



🟩 **English territory** 🟥 **Danish or Norse territory**
▨ **Celtic lands** 🟦 **Swamp**

Vikings in the British Isles

The areas of Viking conquest that became known as the Danelaw

The first significant Viking attack on the British Isles was in 793, when the Vikings carried out a brutal raid on the island monastery of Lindisfarne. The almost constant assaults on Britain's coastline over the next few centuries were too much for the Anglo-Saxons and Celts, who surrendered a vast swathe of land to the Norse raiders.

This excavation site shows a Viking footpath in Dublin. 'Dubhlinn' was a prominent area of Viking activity during the Norse occupation

The theories behind the Viking expansion

Exhausted farmland

Scandinavia has a variety of landscapes but none were ideal for farming. Norway was too mountainous, Sweden had extensive forests, while Denmark could be too sandy.

Desire for treasure

Searching far-off lands for plunder is something the Vikings became associated with. Raids were carried out overseas and a settlement would be built to cement their claim to the loot.

Overcrowding

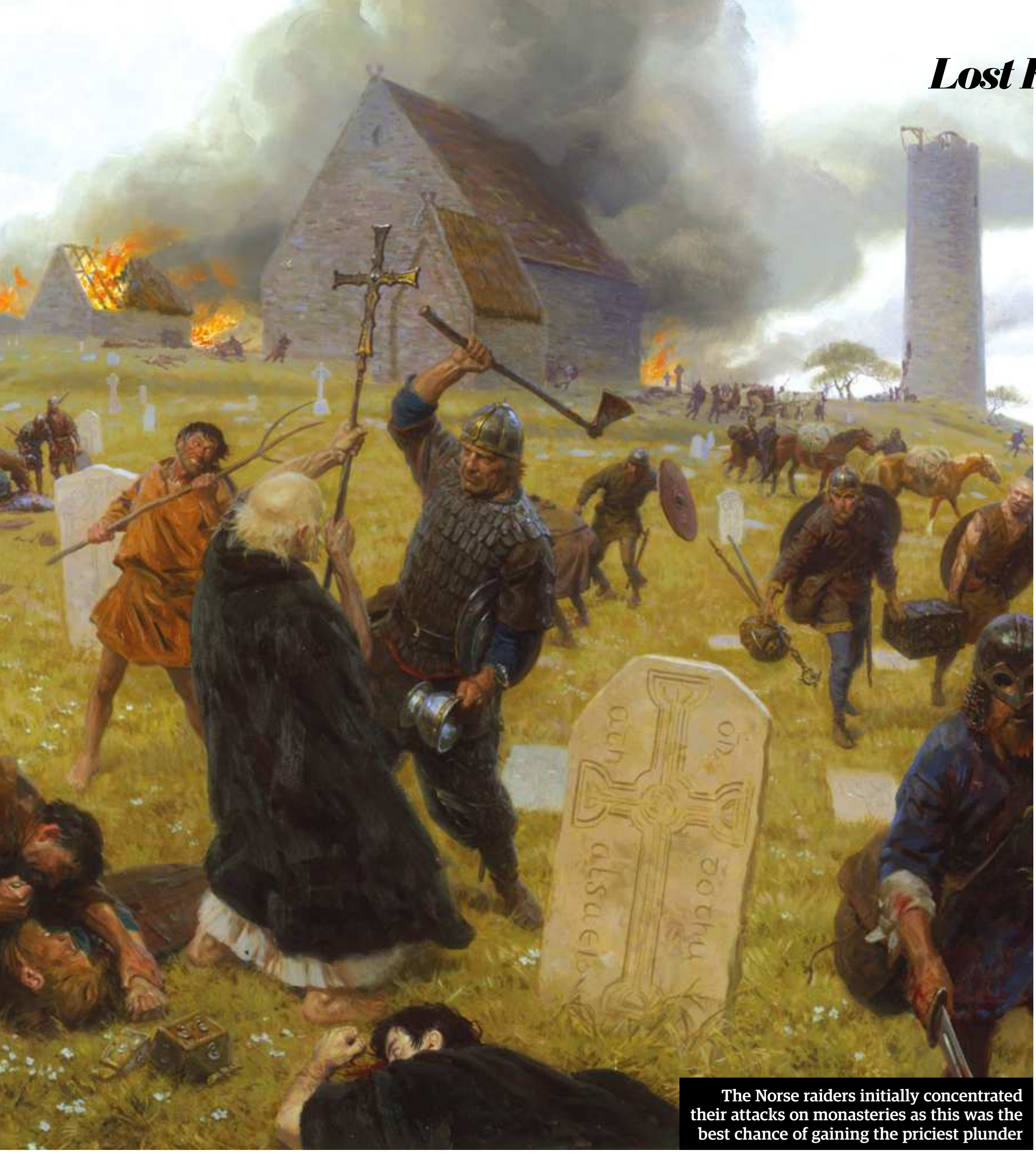
As the Viking population swelled, many sought to move elsewhere. The eldest son inherited family lands, so younger brothers would venture in search of territory to call their own.

Wanderlust

A sense of adventure was a common Viking trait. Even when the treasure dried up, the Norsemen were keen to seek out new lands in far-off places like America and Constantinople.

New trade routes

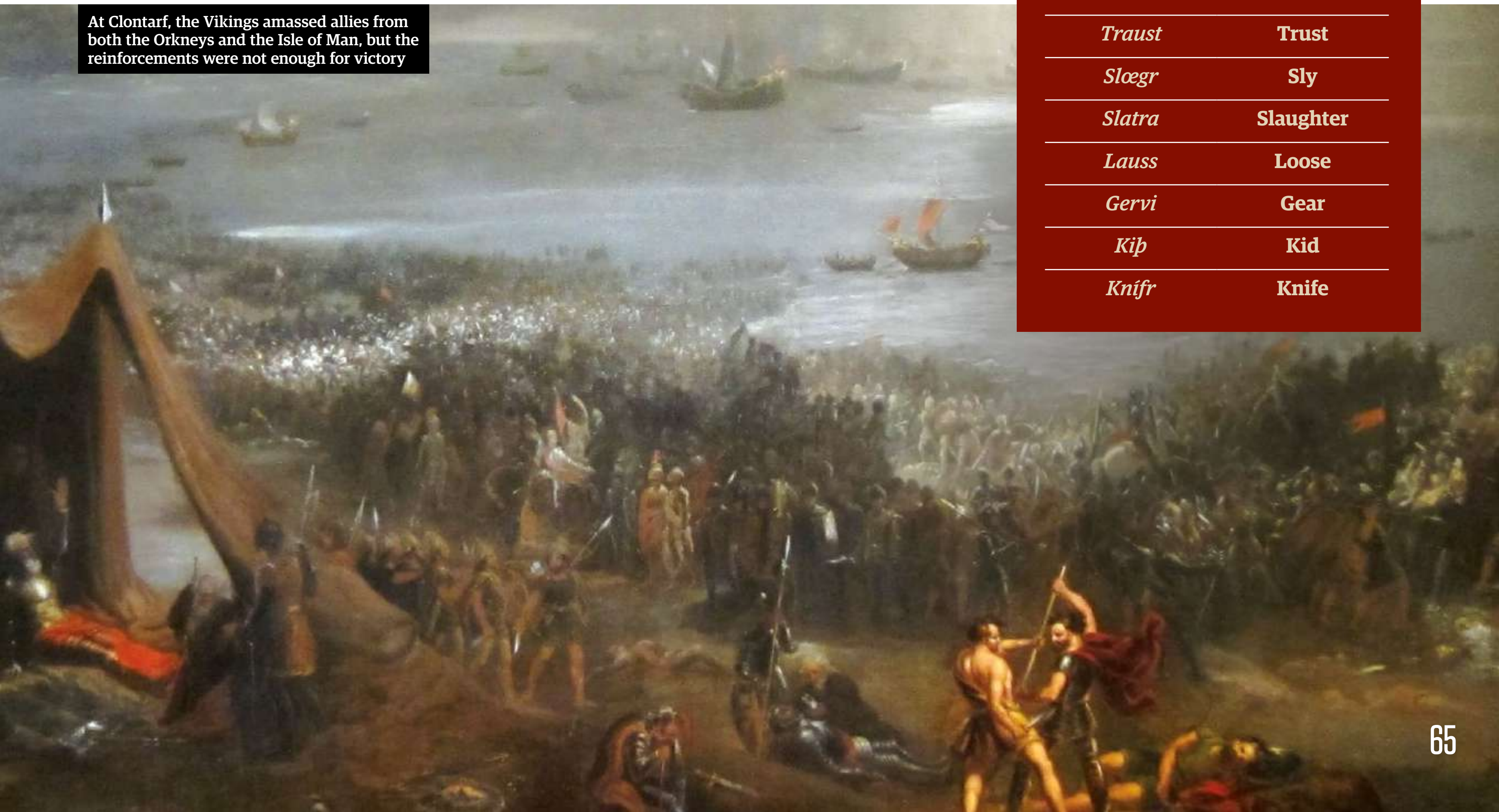
The popularity of Christianity meant that many of the nearby Christian kingdoms refused to trade. As a result, the pagan Vikings would either invade the lands or look elsewhere.



The Norse raiders initially concentrated their attacks on monasteries as this was the best chance of gaining the priciest plunder

Norse words that invaded the English language

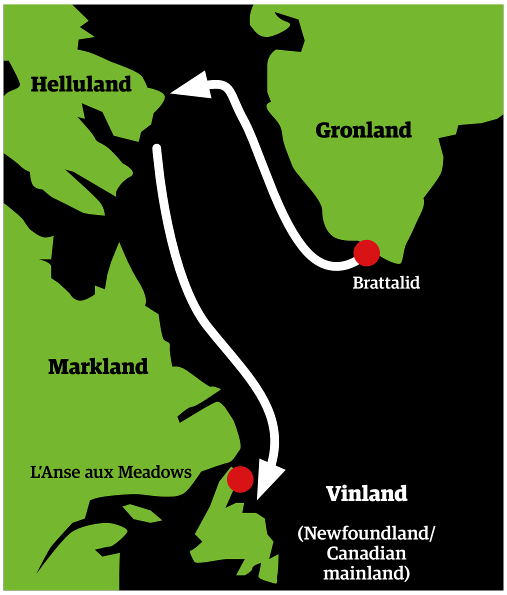
OLD NORSE	Modern English
Sala	Sale
Klubba	Club
Beit	Snack
Rannsaka	Ransack
Fiall	Hill
Berserkr	Berserk
Hloppa	Flea
Burðr	Birth
Kalla	Call
Kasta	Cast
Krafla	Crawl
Hús bóndi	Husband
Leggr	Leg
Uggr	Ugly
Rotinn	Rotten
Renna	Run
Traust	Trust
Slœgr	Sly
Slatra	Slaughter
Lauss	Loose
Gervi	Gear
Kiþ	Kid
Knífr	Knife



At Clontarf, the Vikings amassed allies from both the Orkneys and the Isle of Man, but the reinforcements were not enough for victory

North America

With parts of Northern Europe ransacked, the Vikings turned their attention to the other side of the Atlantic



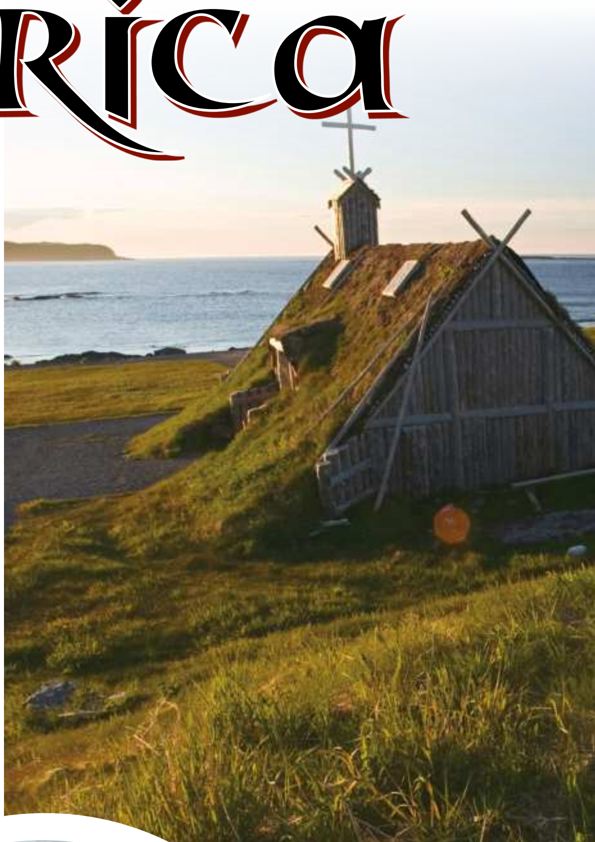
The true extent of the Viking presence in North America is hotly debated, but it will always be one of the greatest achievements of maritime exploration. After the Norse Vikings populated Iceland in about 870, Greenland was next to follow, with its conquest instigated in the 980s by the notorious Erik the Red. The rough seas of the Atlantic were much tougher than the Vikings had previously experienced on the North Sea. To combat the difficult conditions, the Norse mariners used a type of ship known as a knarr. Larger than the standard longship, it could carry much more cargo and would stand up to whatever the Atlantic had to throw at it. This allowed for longer and more fruitful journeys. By 1150, 72,000 Norsemen were living in Iceland while 5,000 resided in Greenland.

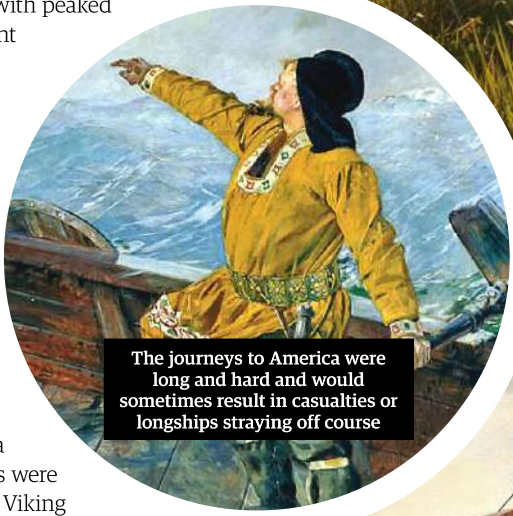
The adventuring continued, and the first Viking sightings of North America came in about 985, when Icelander Bjarni Herjólfsson spotted uncharted land after being blown off course on his way to Greenland. The stories of a new land encouraged others to seek it out. In about 1000, Leif Eriksson, the son of Erik the Red, was the first to set foot on this unexplored territory. Eriksson and his 35-man crew may have been sent by Norwegian king Olaf I to spread Christianity (Olaf was one of the first Vikings to preach the ideas of the religion) and discovered three places around the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Eriksson named them Helluland (land of flat rocks), Markland (land of forest and timber) and Vinland (land of warmth and vines). We know them today as Baffin Island, the Labrador coast and Newfoundland.

After this initial excursion, the westward journeys only continued. The most extensive voyage was undertaken by Thorfinn Karlsefni, who intended to settle in this new found land for good, taking more than 100 men and women as well as tools, weapons and farm animals on his expedition. His wife gave birth to the first child from the old world to be born in the new. As more Vikings made the journey, it was inevitable they would make contact with the native population. Norse men and women called the natives Skrælingjar and became trading partners, benefiting from the fur given to them by the locals. The Skrælingjar were a pre-Iron Age civilisation and most likely the ancestors of the modern Inuit. They were given their first taste of iron weaponry and tools by these visitors from across the sea.

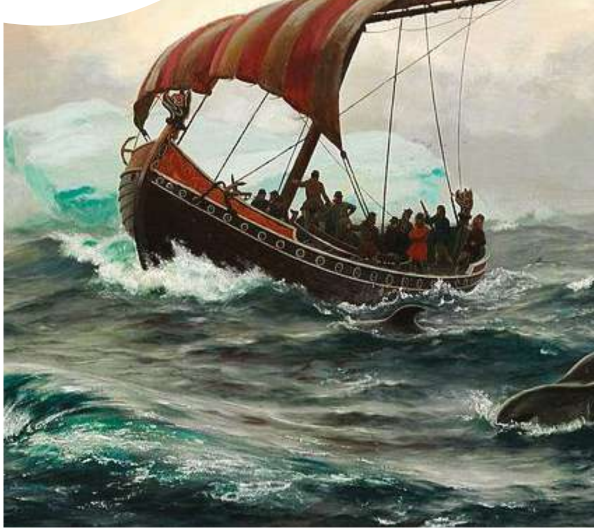
The settlements built by the Vikings in North America consisted of sod walls with peaked timber roofs. The most prominent settlement, and what is seen as proof of Viking occupation, is L'Anse aux Meadows. Located on the northern tip of Vinland, the area is believed to have been home to about 75 people and would have probably acted as a base camp for repairing ships. After approximately two or three years of attempted colonisation, the Skrælingjar began to see the Vikings as a threat and unrest broke out. As a result of the violence, trade visits were no longer a worthwhile venture. Viking activity in North America was dramatically reduced, as the settlements in Greenland could no longer support further trade missions that lost both men and valuable resources. Greenland wasn't a fully functioning Norse colony, and these less than favourable economic conditions made journeys to North America more and more difficult.

The Viking failure to colonise the Americas on a long-term basis was due to both natural hazards and native resistance, but also confirmed the limitations of nautical conquest in the early Middle Ages. The distance from Greenland to Vinland is about 3,500 kilometres, which was a tough journey for any Medieval vessel, and the small population didn't have the manpower to overpower the natives. They may have discovered North America 500 years before Columbus, but the Vikings were unable to sustain a stable colony in the New World.





The journeys to America were long and hard and would sometimes result in casualties or longships straying off course



The Vikings made it to Greenland in 982 and established both eastern and western settlements with about 300 farmsteads

Norse technology was not significantly more advanced than that of the natives meaning the Vikings found it difficult to assert their authority

What became of Vinland?

Expert bio: Dr Alex Sanmark is reader in Medieval Archaeology at the Centre for Nordic Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands. She specialises in various aspects of the Viking Age, from religion to law and gender, both in Scandinavia and the Norse settlements in the north Atlantic.

How important is L'Anse aux Meadows to our understanding of Viking settlements in the New World?

It is hugely important because it is the only Viking settlement in the New World. There are other types of archaeological evidence, though. Two Icelandic sagas, for instance, tell us about the Vikings sailing to Vinland from Greenland and Iceland. This has, of course, spurred people's imagination, and many have been looking for evidence of Viking presence a lot further south, especially in the US. Others have faked the evidence by producing their own runic inscriptions. The Viking settlement of the New World is an important political issue for some who are keen to show that 'Europeans' were there from early on. The sagas are highly problematic as sources as they are very late, dating from the 13th century onwards, and they are also literature, meaning that they don't necessarily tell us exactly what happened. We can't rely on them for evidence, so this settlement is of great importance.

> "The settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows was probably never intended to be permanent, but rather a base for resources"

Are there any similar Viking settlements to L'Anse aux Meadows in the Americas?

No, but a possible Viking camp has been identified on Baffin Island in recent years. There is also an increasing amount of archaeological evidence from Canada that shows that the Vikings were there and traded with the natives. It is possible that established trading networks were in place and the Vikings may well have travelled a lot further inland than previously thought. Viking presence is above all traced through artefacts that the native people did not have, such as finds of metal, strike-a-lights and woollen cloth. These finds are important as they point to friendly interactions, which is not always the image provided by the written sources.

Why did the Vikings survive hundreds of years in Greenland but could not establish themselves in Vinland, with its richer resources and better climate?

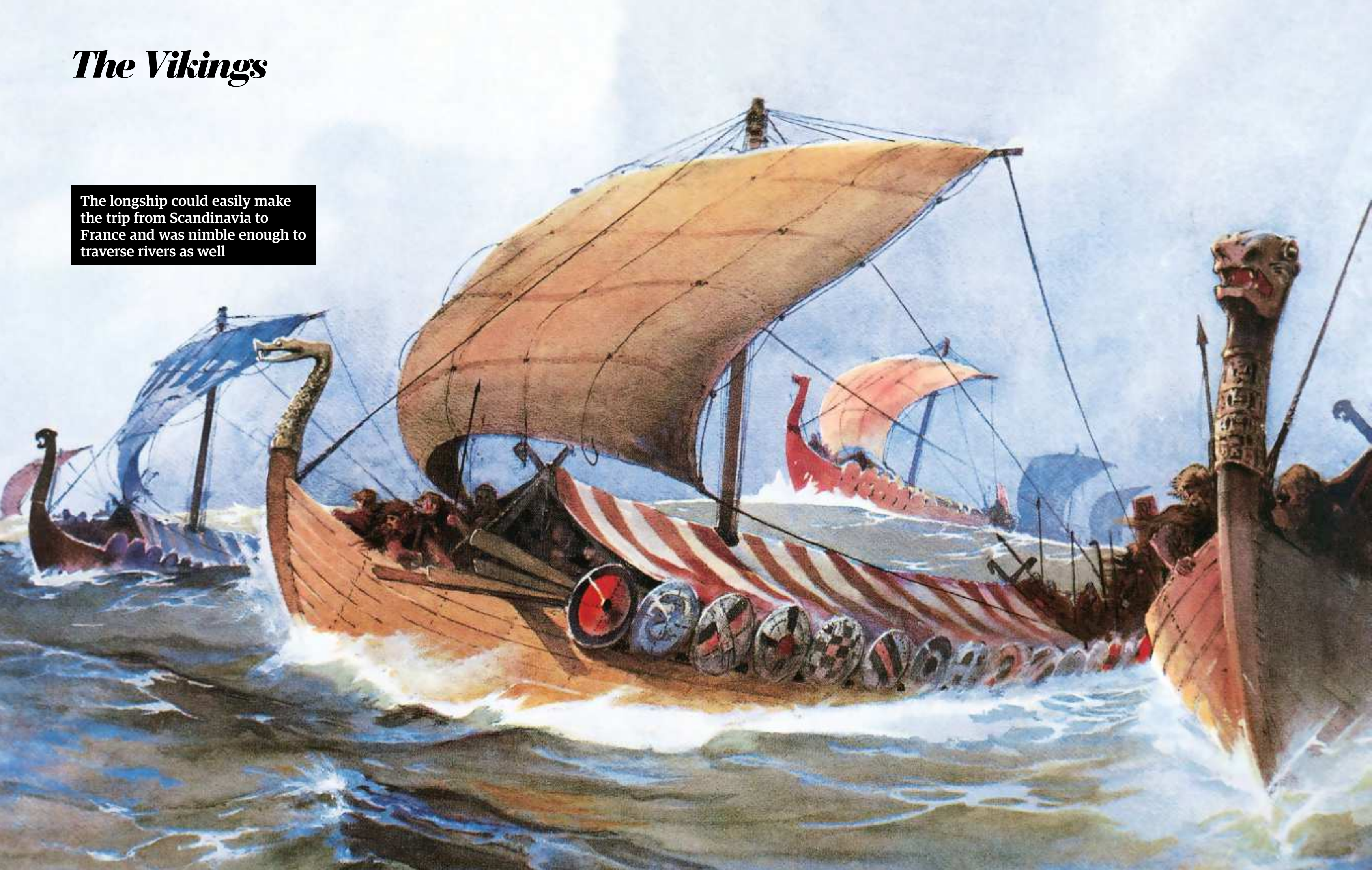
The settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows was probably never intended to be permanent, but rather a base for resources, such as wood, which they could not get in Greenland. The Vikings seem to have stayed there for short periods of time as the number of Norse in Greenland was never very large, and setting up a new colony would have required a substantial group of people to be successful. Also, L'Anse aux Meadows was not a very useful area for resources that were unavailable in Greenland, for these the Vikings had to travel quite far inland. The journey between Greenland and Canada was long and could take up to a month, which of course made regular journeys between the two areas difficult. It may be, although there is no evidence to prove this, that the relationship with the natives was so difficult that the settlement was abandoned.

What were relations with the Native Americans like?

We don't know very much about this. The sagas tell us both about trading with the native population and about fights between them. On the other hand, there is increasing evidence of interaction between the two groups and it may be that the whole situation was a lot more positive than the image provided by the sagas. The sagas are literature after all, and it may have been more interesting to describe fighting than trading. In view of recent archaeological finds, I'm sure more evidence will be appearing in the future.

How could a longship or a knarr make it all the way across the Atlantic?

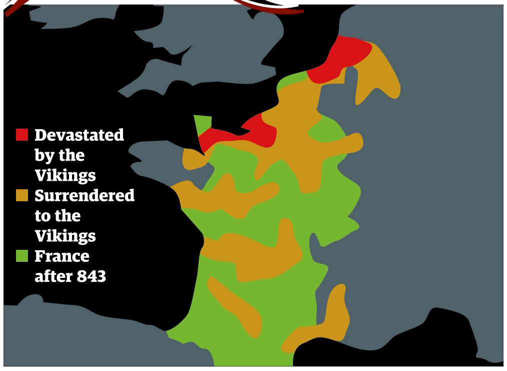
It may seem strange to us that people set out across the North Atlantic in open ships, but we need to see this in its context. It was of course a very long and dangerous journey, and the sagas contain stories about ships being lost on the way. People in the Viking age were, however, very used to travelling in this way and they didn't start by crossing the Atlantic. People in Scandinavia were using ships with sails from the early Iron Age and developed their ships and sailing skills over several hundred years. They were extremely talented seamen and knew when and how to sail, following currents, fish and seabirds.



The longship could easily make the trip from Scandinavia to France and was nimble enough to traverse rivers as well

FRANCE

Across the Channel, Vikings threatened the Franks in Normandy, Brittany and Aquitaine



By the end of the 9th century, Vikings from Denmark had increased the amount of coastal assaults on Western Europe and would proceed to populate significant amounts of territory in Normandy, Brittany and Aquitaine. Their leader, Reginherus or Ragnar, thought by some to be the legendary figure Ragnar Lodbrok described in Old Norse poetry, had the confidence and the audacity to siege Paris in 845.

Ragnar led an army of 120 longships and 5,000 warriors – fierce men who had already scorched the earth all over Europe. After plundering Rouen, the siege of Paris began on 28 March. Although the attackers were stopped in their tracks by a plague that spread through the camp, they still managed to take the city, and were only stopped from burning it to the ground by a last-ditch Frankish ransom of 7,000 pounds of silver.

Despite being primarily Danish territory, a Norwegian leader emerged by the name of Hrölfr, or, as he is more commonly known, Rollo. Already a veteran of conflicts on the British Isles, his military forces besieged the city of Chartres, forcing the king of the Franks, Charles III, to sign the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte in 911, granting Rollo feudal rights in the area around Rouen.

Viking land now stretched from Normandy in the north to Aquitaine in the south, and remained under Viking control for about two centuries. Even though they had foreign invaders in their lands, this was actually of benefit to the Franks as it meant the Norsemen would effectively provide them with a buffer zone against coastal invasions from other enemies of the realm.

It was not long until Christianity and Frankish customs started to take over from Nordic culture. Rollo himself was baptised and the Normans that invaded England in 1066 were descendants of the Normandy Vikings. The Medieval French word for a Scandinavian is 'Normand', a term that was then given to the area (Normandy) and the people that inhabited it (Normans). Harald Hardrada may have been defeated at Stamford Bridge, but William the Conqueror's forces that were victorious at Hastings were more Norse than many think.

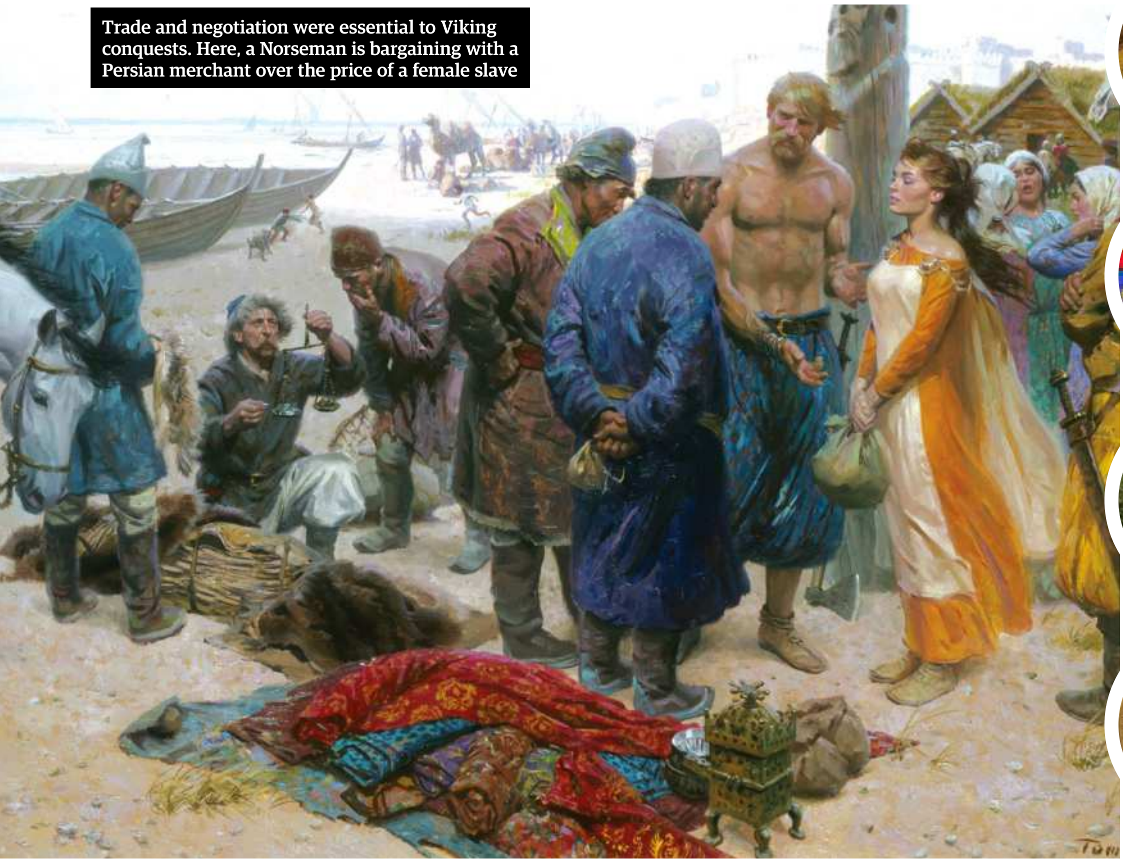
RUSSIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

Using the river systems of the Baltic to their advantage, the Vikings travelled east for further trade and conquest

One of the greatest Viking achievements is perhaps their foray deep into Eastern Europe. In the 9th century, the Slavic tribes in Russia and Eastern Europe were fast becoming exhausted by constant inter-tribal wars that were stretching their resources and affecting their commerce. Capitalising on the broken alliances, the Viking ships arrived from the Gulf of Finland in huge numbers. Using large rivers such as the Volga, Neva and Volkhov as waterways, the men from the north vastly expanded their territory.

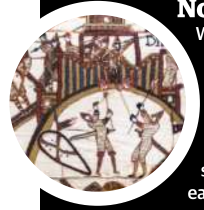
The town of Novgorod on the banks of Lake Ilmen became one of the main strongholds for the Nordic invaders, who were known as the 'Rus'. The East European plain provided the Vikings with forest and grassland that was ideal for hunting, fishing and farming. The plentiful food supply helped trade routes expand further northwards towards Lake Ladoga and southwards down the River Dnieper. The Rus people traded with local Slavic tribes and travelled into modern-day Russia, helping give the nation its name in the process. The three Swedish kings who came from overseas were Rurik, Sineus and Truvor, who settled in Novgorod, Beloozerg and Izborsk. Rurik's son, Oleg of Novgorod, travelled 600 miles south to take control of Kiev in 882 and went on to pillage lands even further southwards, knocking on the door of the Byzantine Empire in the process.

Like many of the areas that the Vikings inhabited, their influence steadily declined and was replaced by local customs. This happened once again in Eastern Europe as the Russian identity began to become distinct from Norse. One of the kings of Kiev, Vladimir, took the decision to make Greek Orthodox the area's religion in 988, decreasing the impact and relevance of Viking paganism even further. The culture change of the Norse people to more Slavic customs resulted in the growth of a Russian dynasty that rivalled the Carolingian Empire in Western Europe. The founders of the Russian tsardom were descendants of the Rurik Dynasty, a Viking dynasty that became one of Europe's oldest royal houses.



Trade and negotiation were essential to Viking conquests. Here, a Norseman is bargaining with a Persian merchant over the price of a female slave

Seven other travelling civilisations

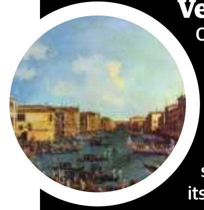


Normans

Well known for their lands in France and England, the Normans were descendants of the Vikings. A realm was established in Sicily and southern Italy in the 10th century and the Norman people also established states in North Africa and even as far east in what is now Lebanon.

Phoenicians

To the Mediterranean what the Vikings were to the north Atlantic, the Phoenicians were one of the finest trading civilisations of the ancient world. The most powerful city-states were Sidon and Tyre, which became almost too tough for Alexander the Great to conquer.



Venetian Republic

One of the finest nautical trading powers of all time, Venice was the greatest seaport in Late Medieval Europe. The Venetians were excellent shipbuilders thanks to the marshy lagoon in which they lived. The Republic controlled states such as Istria and Dalmatia until its decline and fall in the Napoleonic era.

Genoese Republic

Venice's rival in chief, Genoa benefited from a natural harbour that led to the Ligurian Sea. Its booming maritime economy allowed it to be an independent republic for 800 years. Genoa's trade helped the West in the Crusades and had links as far away as Crimea before losing ground to Venice.

Kalmar Union

In many ways the successor to the Vikings in Scandinavia, the people of the Kalmar Union were great travellers. The kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden were incorporated under one crown with Copenhagen as the capital. The Union also incorporated Iceland and Greenland.

Srivijaya

Another civilisation that based its power on sea trade, the Srivijaya Empire prospered between the 7th and 13th centuries. In its heyday, the civilisation had trade links with India, China and the Malay Archipelago. Their power waned after attacks by the Chola and Malayu people.

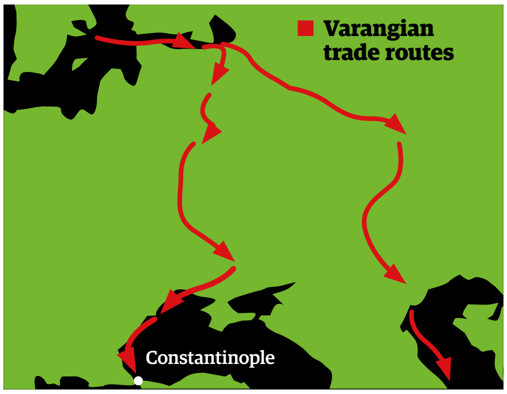
Abbāsid Caliphate

After overthrowing the Umayyad Caliphate in 750, the Abbāsid Dynasty became the strongest empire in Asia Minor and northern Africa until the Mongols in 1258. The caliphate presided over the 'Golden Age of Islam' as Muslim merchants traded in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean.

Images: Dorindavidaurel (Phoenicians), Alain Thebault (Kalmar Union), PHGCOM (Abbāsid Caliphate), Anandajoti (Srivijaya) CC BY-SA 3.0

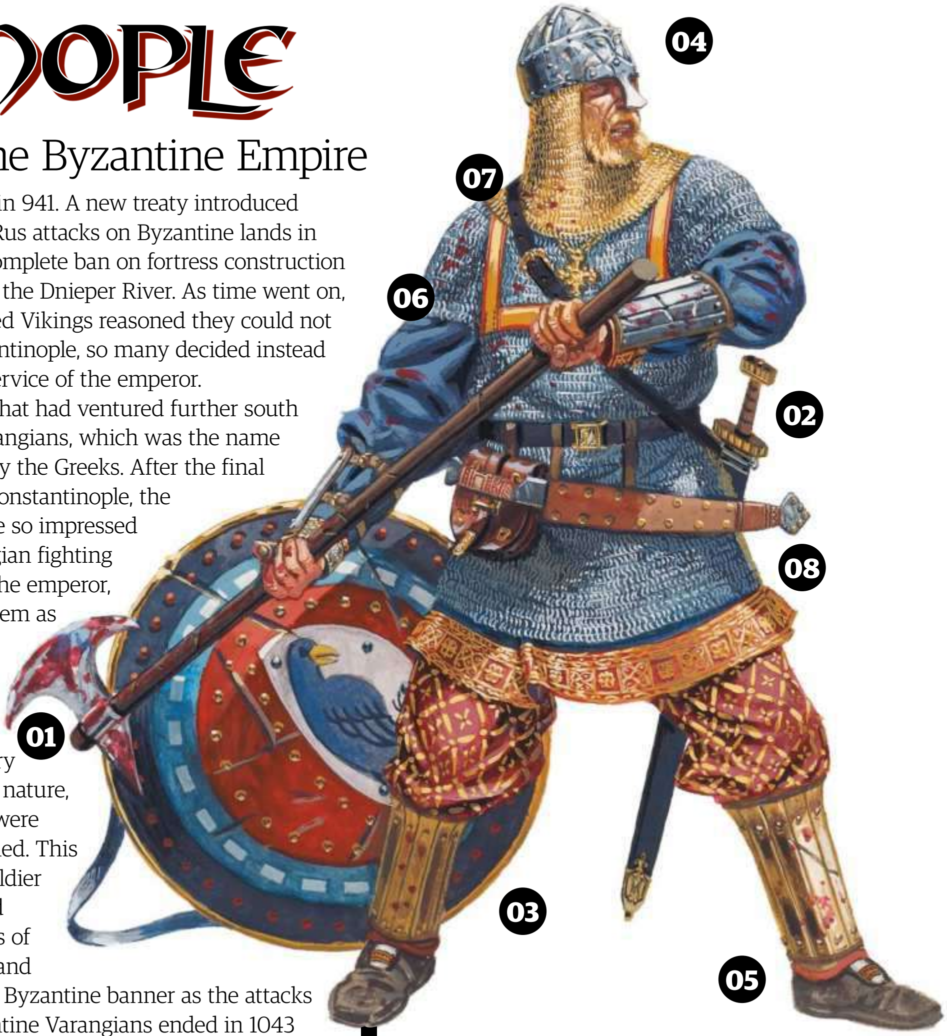
CONSTANTINOPLE

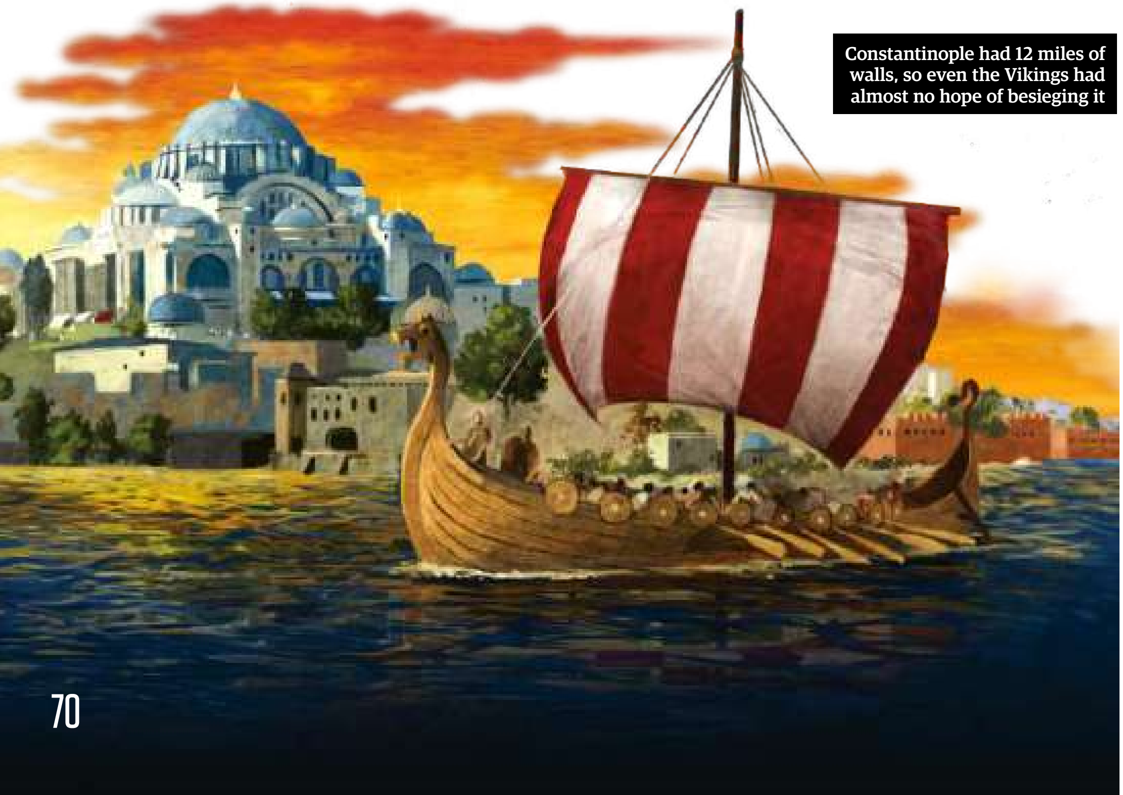
The Vikings venture to the gates of the Byzantine Empire



Viking lands were growing ever southwards, and by the early 10th century, an encounter with the Byzantine Empire was imminent. The movement came to a head in 860 during the siege of Constantinople, as a flotilla of 200 Viking warships emerged from the darkness and headed for the city they knew as 'Miklagard' (the Great City). After this, accounts become quite hazy, but the most likely outcome is the Vikings could only conquer the suburbs and not the fortified inner city without siege equipment. Determined to plunder the wealth of what was the biggest city the Vikings had ever seen, assaults continued, eventually resulting in the 2 September 911 commercial trading treaty. This brought friendly relations between the two states and frequent trade across the Black Sea as the Vikings took control of the Volga Trade Route from the Baltic Sea to the north and the Caspian Sea to the south. By 944, the relations soured, and Oleg's successor, Igor of Kiev, led an unsuccessful campaign against the Byzantines in 941. A new treaty introduced restrictions on Rus attacks on Byzantine lands in Crimea and a complete ban on fortress construction at the mouth of the Dnieper River. As time went on, the overstretched Vikings reasoned they could not conquer Constantinople, so many decided instead to go into the service of the emperor.

The Vikings that had ventured further south were called Varangians, which was the name given to them by the Greeks. After the final failed siege of Constantinople, the Byzantines were so impressed with the Varangian fighting mentality that the emperor, Basil II, hired them as warriors as part of his personal guard in 988. The Byzantine military was very multicultural in nature, so Viking men were warmly welcomed. This new breed of soldier travelled far and wide to the likes of Syria, Armenia and Sicily under the Byzantine banner as the attacks from non-Byzantine Varangians ended in 1043 after the Rus-Byzantine War. The loss signalled the end of the Varangian advance towards Asia as the area became either Slavic or Byzantine, not Norse. The Varangian Guard soldiered on until the 14th century, though, ensuring that there were still some Vikings standing in Constantinople.





Constantinople had 12 miles of walls, so even the Vikings had almost no hope of besieging it

Anatomy of a Varangian guard

The fearsome warriors who became the most brutal bodyguards of the age

01 Axe

Wielding a foot-long bladed axe, when the Varangian guards arrived, the Byzantine emperor's presence on the battlefield was confirmed.

02 Weaponry

Double-edged swords and spears would also be used if an axe wasn't available, or it was favourable for the conditions of battle.

03 Shield

Shields would be in the classic Viking round style and would be worn on the back when warriors were wielding a two-handed weapon.

04 Helmet

Varangian guards wore an iron conical helmet but were also happy to don a headdress instead in the hot Mediterranean weather.

05 Boots

Tough leather boots were covered by greaves or leg guards to protect the lower legs from hacks and slashes.

06 Clothing

A standard tunic would be worn under the armour along with metal strips that protected the wrists and forearms from slashes.

07 Armour

This elite unit had a choice of lamellar armour made out of iron or bronze plates or a chain mail hauberk.

08 Mounted infantry berserkers

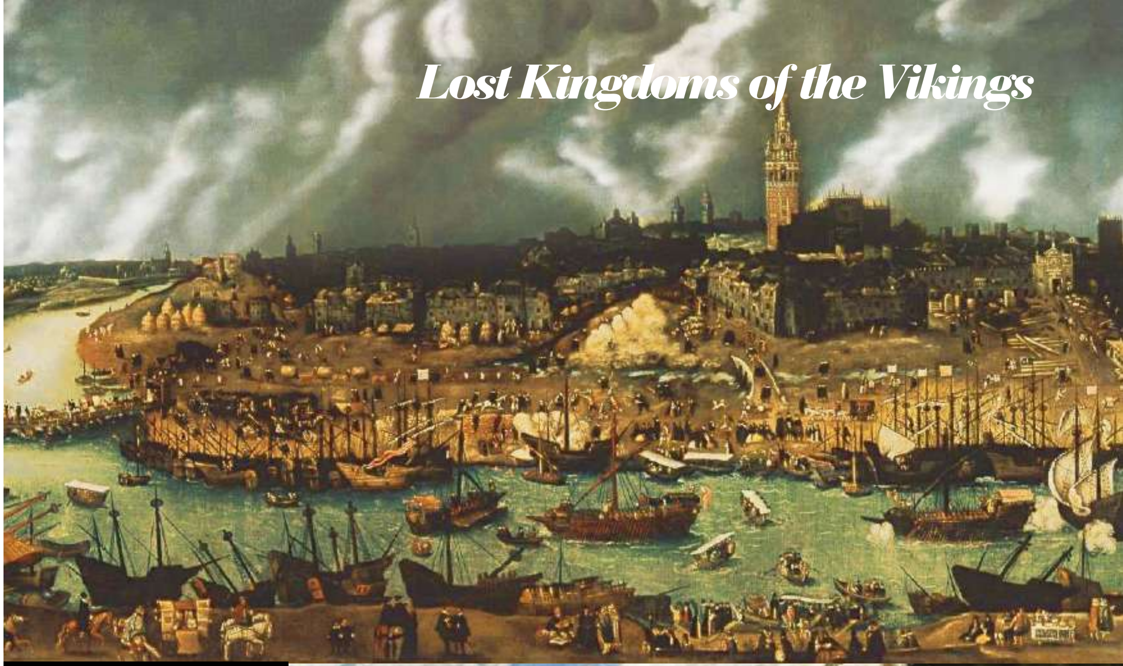
The Varangian guard rode to battle but did their fighting on foot. Their heavy armour had pros and cons depending on the battle.

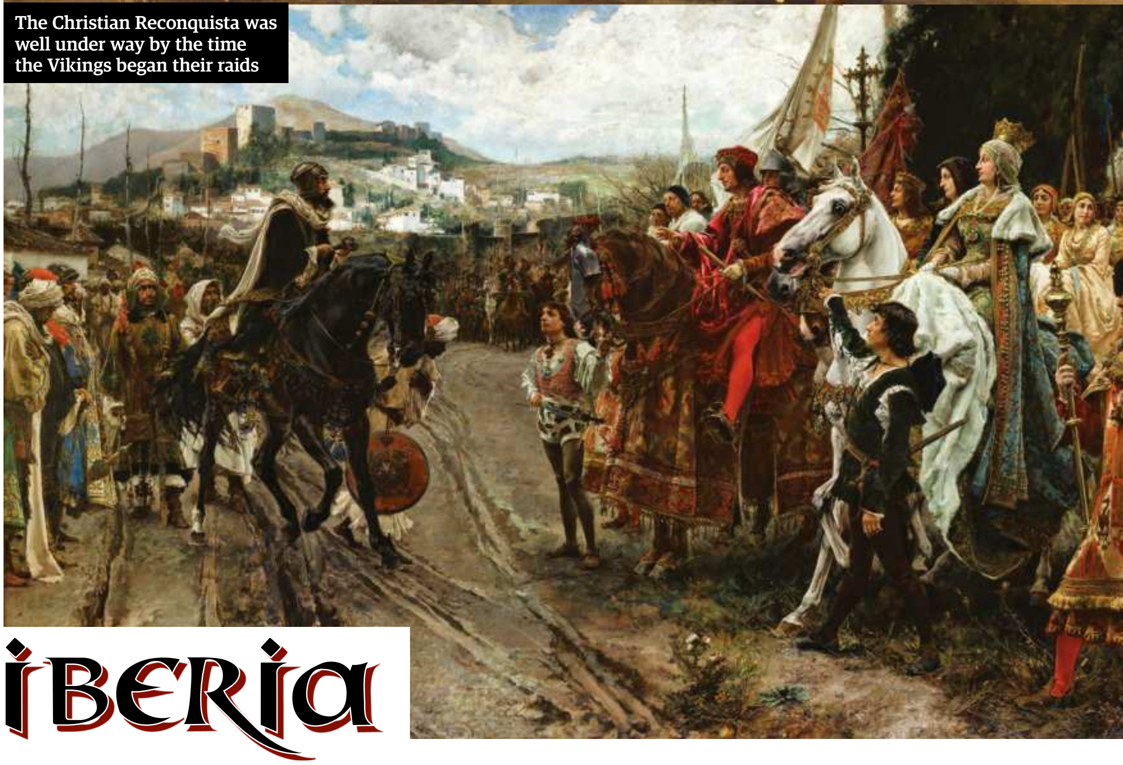
Legacy

The remnants of Viking expansion in Europe, Asia and the Americas

The influence left by the Vikings is greater than many are led to believe. From the Normans in the west to the Rus in the east, many civilisations that went on to dominate the late Middle Ages and beyond owe their roots to Viking expansion. The Vikings helped open the doors to pan-European trade and established urban centres at Dublin, Kiev and Reykjavík, cities at almost opposite ends of Europe. The effect of Norse culture is restricted more than it could have been as the Vikings never truly settled south of Denmark. They were an exploring people who lacked mass land armies and huge cities to stamp their authority and leadership on areas outside their own sphere of influence. They simply did not have the construction nous to establish a citadel as large or as powerful as Constantinople or Rome. Additionally, the Christianisation of Europe watered down the Nordic influence further and ended it completely when Scandinavia was fully converted in the 12th century.

Outside of Europe, Africa and Asia Minor were only briefly settled upon, so the influence seen today is from the Mongol Empire and Islamic caliphates. America suffers from the same problem, and that is why Columbus is and always will be seen as the first to discover the New World. The Viking Age lasted for hundreds of years, and whether it's a city name in northern England, a type of axe or French surnames, the legacy is there for all to see.





The Christian Reconquista was well under way by the time the Vikings began their raids

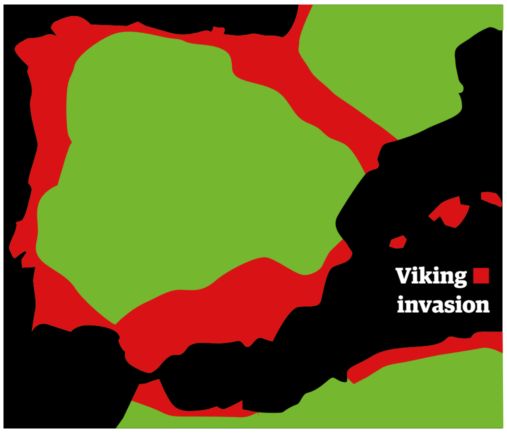
IBERIA

The Norse expansion into the Christian north and Islamic south of Spain

After controlling the Bay of Biscay and establishing themselves on France's western coast, the Vikings moved even further south to the Iberian Peninsula. The first known attack was made up of 100 ships launched from Aquitaine in 844 and raided both Gijon and Coruna. After meeting strong resistance, the seafarers changed tack and headed for what is now Portugal. The raids were initially small and infrequent and, as with most Nordic attacks of the age, the coast was the worst affected. Prisoners were taken and monasteries were destroyed.

The first few assaults were mostly concentrated in the north of the Christian kingdoms of Asturias and Galicia. The southern Islamic part of Spain, al-Andalus, was targeted as well. Seville became a Viking city for six weeks in 844 and Lisbon was plundered for all its worth. The attacks came at a bad time for the Muslim population, who were enduring the start of the Christian Reconquista. Despite the ability for longships to sail from Normandy in less than a week and evidence of longphorts, Iberia would soon become a bridge too far for the Norsemen.

As the attacks subsided, the lands were regained from the Vikings. The Muslim leader, Abd al-Rahman II, took back Seville and sent the heads of 200 Viking warriors to his Moroccan allies. The Vikings returned in 859 led by Bjorn Ironside and Hastein. They sailed around the peninsula in search of southern France and Italy. This turned out to be a shrewd move as both the Muslim and Christian settlements were too strong for long-term attacks to be worthwhile and repelled the Vikings before they could get close to Seville this time. The Norsemen returned north to France but their descendants, the Christianised Normans, would be back in the Mediterranean in later centuries.



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Life & Society

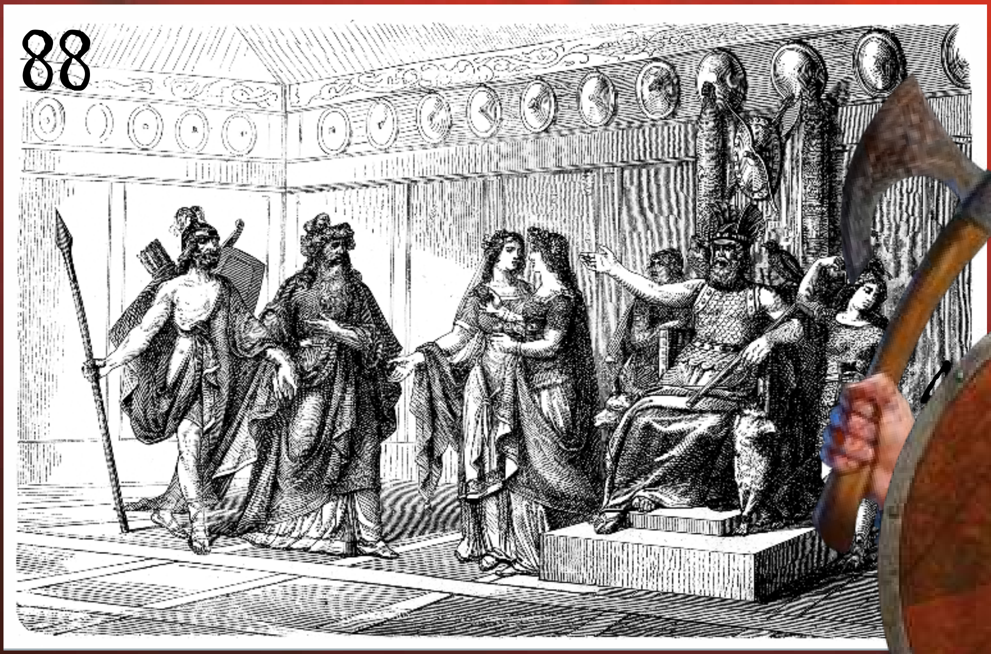
74 Viking Justice
82 How to Survive Trial by combat
84 Women in the Viking Age
86 How to Build a Viking settlement
88 What is a Viking Saga?
94 Viking Heroes
96 Viking Myths
98 Gods of the North
102 The Cult of Thor

96

102

84

86


88

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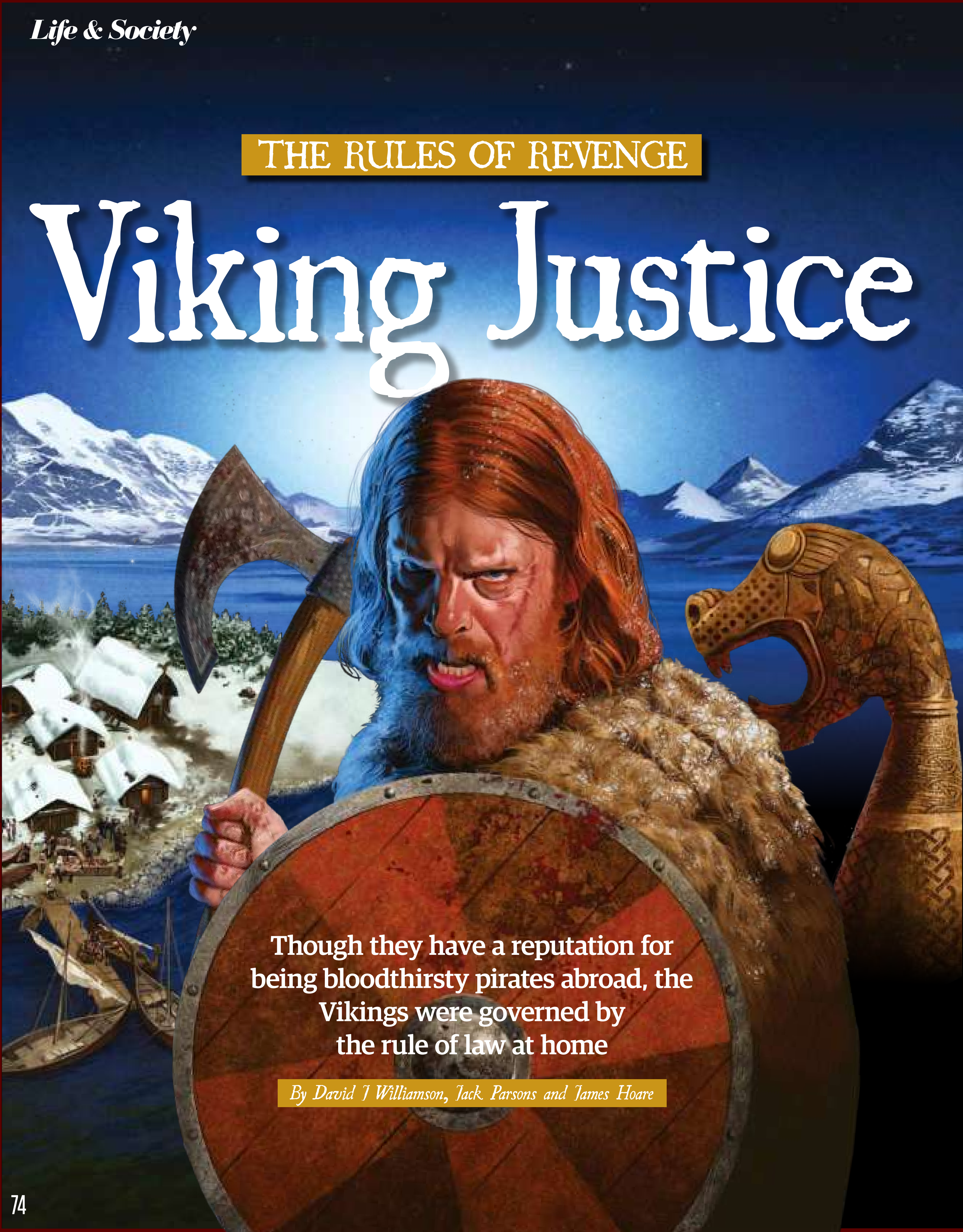
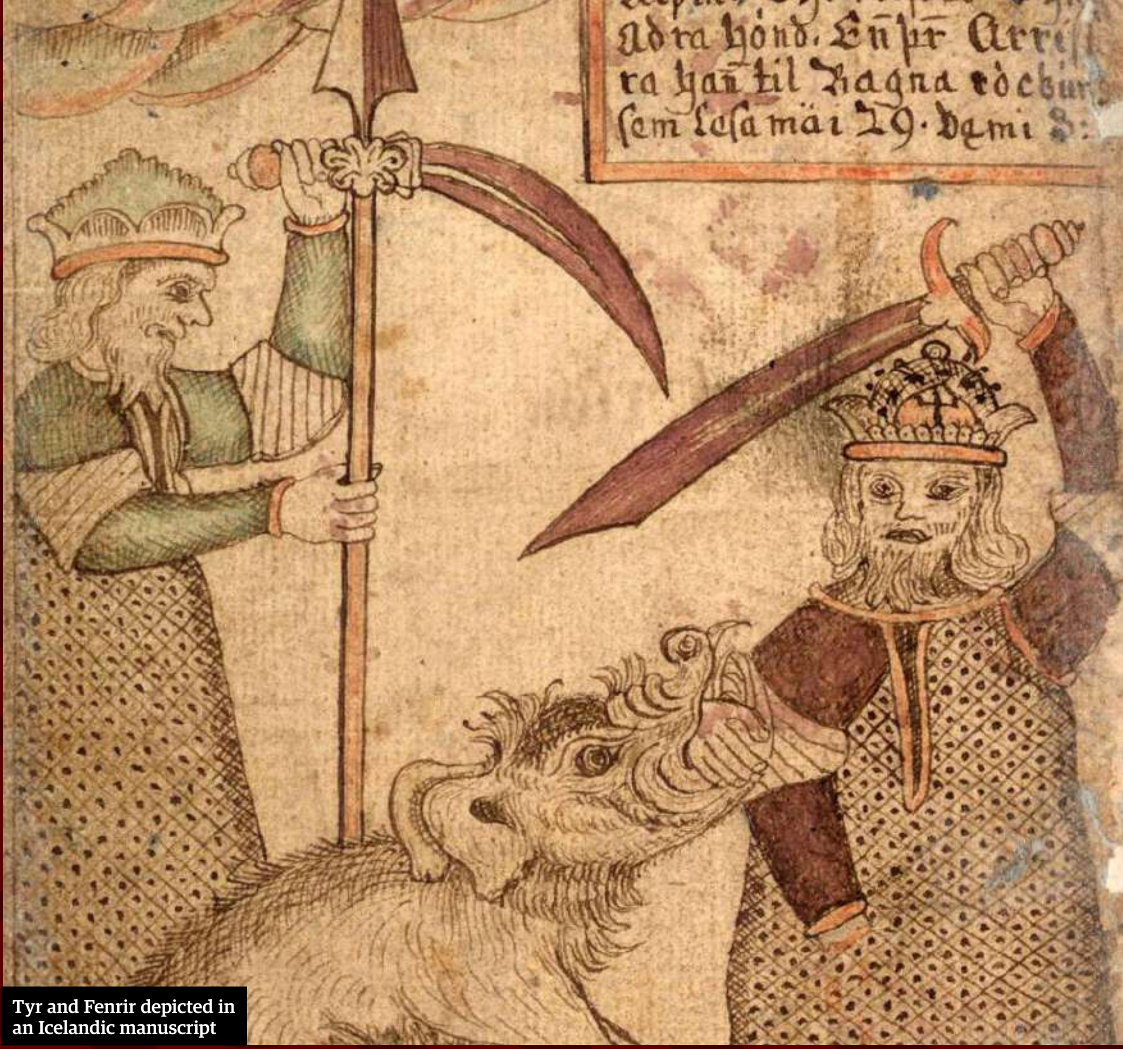
THE RULES OF REVENGE

Viking Justice



Though they have a reputation for being bloodthirsty pirates abroad, the Vikings were governed by the rule of law at home

By David J Williamson, Jack Parsons and James Hoare


adra hönd. En þr Arre
ra han til Ragna röckur
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Tyr and Fenrir depicted in an Icelandic manuscript

One vivid image of Viking raiders has endured over the centuries: rampant, bloodthirsty warriors emerging from their terrifying longships to ravage villages and towns, terrorising, killing without mercy and ransacking holy places of their precious and treasured possessions. To their terrified victims they were unruly savages, seemingly governed only by their thirst for battle and desire for gold and land.

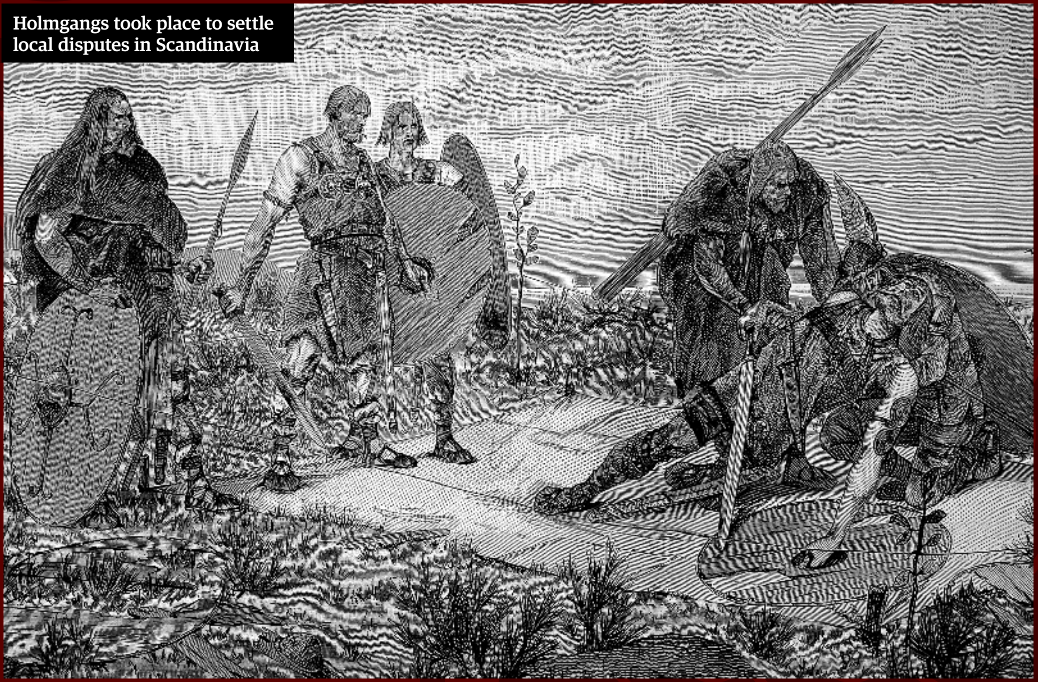
Yet behind the wild and uncontrollable image there lies a different story: men and women from an ordered society that had structure and a deeply rooted desire for fairness and justice. Punishments could be severely disproportionate to the crime – just calling someone a coward could see you have to fight them to the death – but the Viking legal system was based on a legislative assembly where all free men had a say and trials were carried out with a jury of your peers.

We use the term Vikings broadly, but it's wrong to think of these people as a single group from a single place. In the Viking Age, as now, Scandinavia was a complex collection of countries, each with their own slightly different variation of a deeper shared culture and belief system, as well as their own ambitions and plans. Even these nations contained multitudes, beset as they were by clan feuds, political factions and bitter disputes between individuals.

The need for laws and a system that was acceptable and workable for all was essential. In a society made up of farmers and warriors, often spread over vast distances, there was a dire need for something to draw these disparate people together, to maintain discipline among themselves and unity against others.

What evolved through the Viking Age was the Thing – a public gathering that would provide the opportunity for all people to express their views and settle disputes. New laws were made at the Allthing, an annual event where the opinions of the entire population could be heard on topics such as taxes, deciding and confirming who was king, and even peace treaties. The Allthing would also be a chance to trade between distant, scattered settlements and host religious festivals. While the most important disputes might be discussed at the Allthing, crimes were normally tried at the local

Holmgangs took place to settle local disputes in Scandinavia



Divine judgement

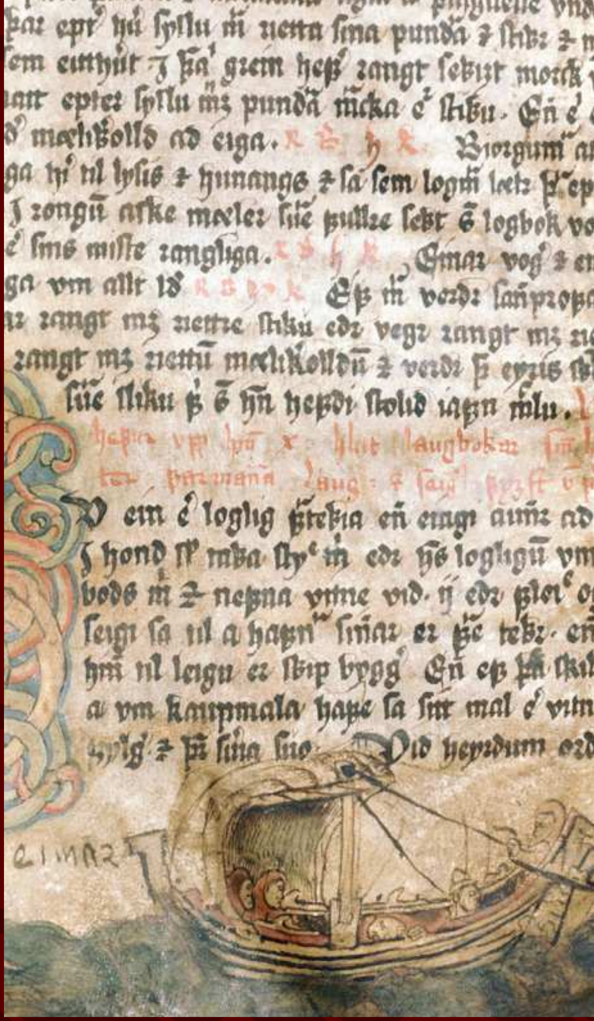
The saga of Tyr and Fenrir helped engrain a sense of justice into Norse culture

The importance of stories and sagas, especially about the exploits of the gods, was deeply ingrained into Viking society. The tales inspired and guided them as to how they should live their lives. The story of Tyr and Fenrir is a good example of the Viking sense of justice.

It was prophesised that the giant wolf Fenrir would devour the god Odin, so the gods set out to capture him. They instructed dwarves to create magical chains, each stronger than the last, to bind Fenrir, telling the wolf that they would test his strength. But upon seeing them, the cunning wolf became suspicious.

Then Fenrir, son of the trickster god Loki, had an idea. He said that he would only allow himself to be bound if one of the gods placed their hand in the wolf's mouth as an act of good faith. Tyr, the god of war, law and order, was the only one brave enough to volunteer. As expected, when Fenrir realised he could not escape the magical bonds, he promptly bit off Tyr's hand.

Tyr's actions were the embodiment of truth and justice to the Vikings. The gods had pledged an oath to the beast that had to be fulfilled and, as grisly as it may have been, Tyr saw his sacrifice as the only way in which justice could be served. In Viking society, the breaking of an oath was held in great contempt. The story of Tyr and Fenrir was the foundation of their unwavering belief in the strength of fairness and justice. Whether it was because of the legend or a reason the detail was added to the story, it was also forbidden to bind another person unless they had committed a crime.



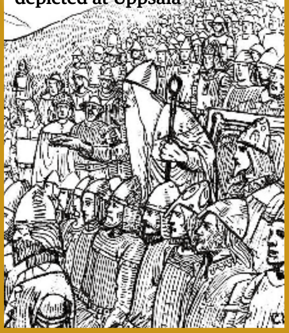
and regional level at a Law-Thing, which were smaller but more met more frequently. These would cover topics such as property disputes and marital affairs but perhaps also those that needed to be dealt with more urgency, such as a murder investigation.

In most communities, a Thing would be presided over by a chieftain or even a king. However, this was not always the case. In Iceland there was no single figurehead at the centre of the rule of law and the people would elect a leader - admittedly, they still usually came from one of the wealthiest families on the island.

But it was the contribution made by the free men, known as karls, that made the Viking assemblies so much more democratic and set the standard for the system of law we recognise today.

Viking society had a simple structure, with the majority of wealth and power concentrated in the hands of nobles, the jarls. Below them were the karls and then at the very bottom were the thralls, slaves who were usually foreigners captured on raids.

Torgny Lagmann, the name of at least three law-sayers, depicted at Uppsala



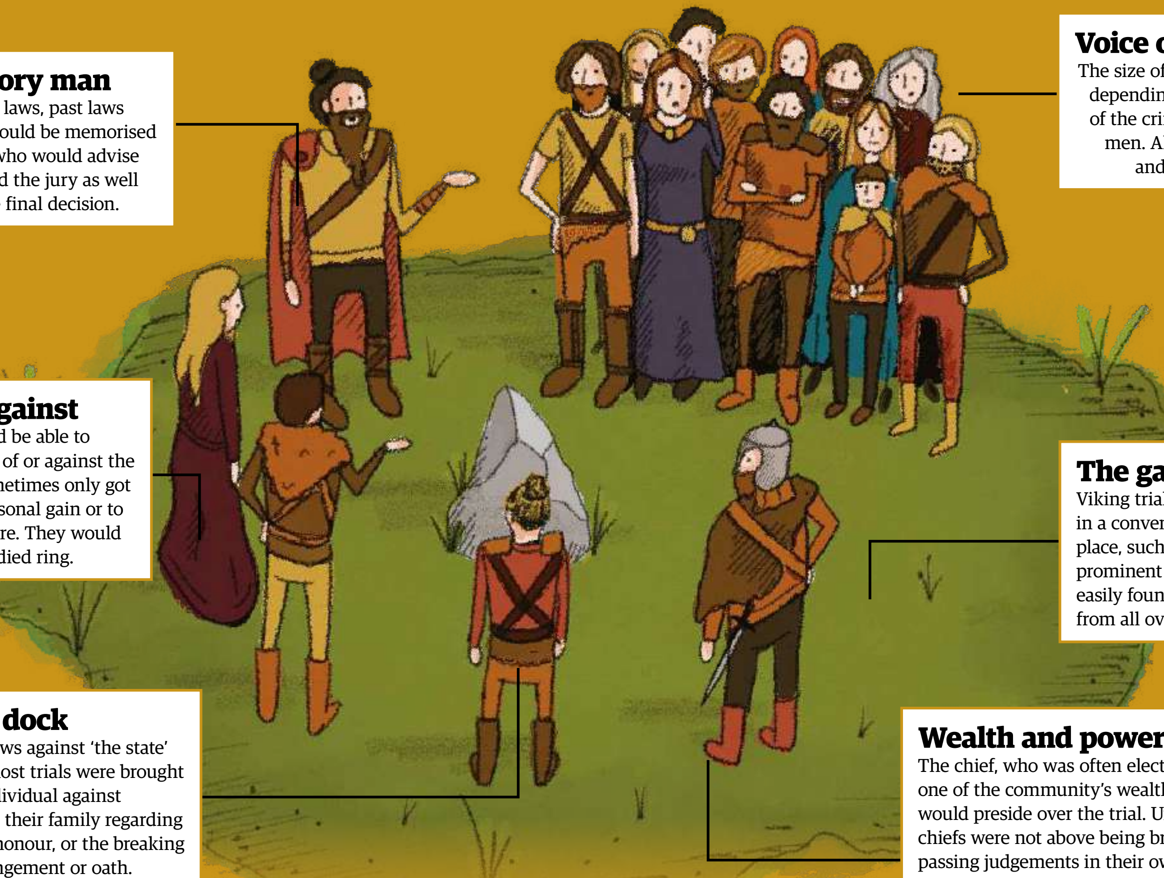
Each year at the Thing, the free men found their voice. We say men because, although attendance was every free man's duty, it was optional for women. While it is argued that this was for the practical reason that someone still needed to watch the homestead, it came with the assumption that men should handle public affairs and domestic life was better suited to women. Women were effectively relegated but this made the Vikings no worse than that other cradle of democracy, Ancient Greece.

Sitting on a panel - or a jury, as we would now call it - the mostly male karls would listen to both sides of any dispute, with testimony coming from the injured party, the accused and any relevant witnesses. While the free men would often be swayed and influenced by the chieftain (who often had their own agenda), they would also be advised and guided by the law-sayer.

In a culture that had little to no writing other than runic symbols, the laws created, decisions made and sentences passed at each Thing would be committed to memory by this remarkable

Open-air trial

Viking disputes would be settled at assemblies known as Things



The memory man

With no written laws, past laws and decisions would be memorised by a law-sayer, who would advise the chieftain and the jury as well as be part of the final decision.

Voice of the people

The size of the jury would vary depending on the seriousness of the crime, with 12, 24 or 36 men. All had to be free men and at least 12 years old.

For and against

Witnesses would be able to speak on behalf of or against the accused but sometimes only got involved for personal gain or to settle an old score. They would swear on a bloodied ring.

The gathering

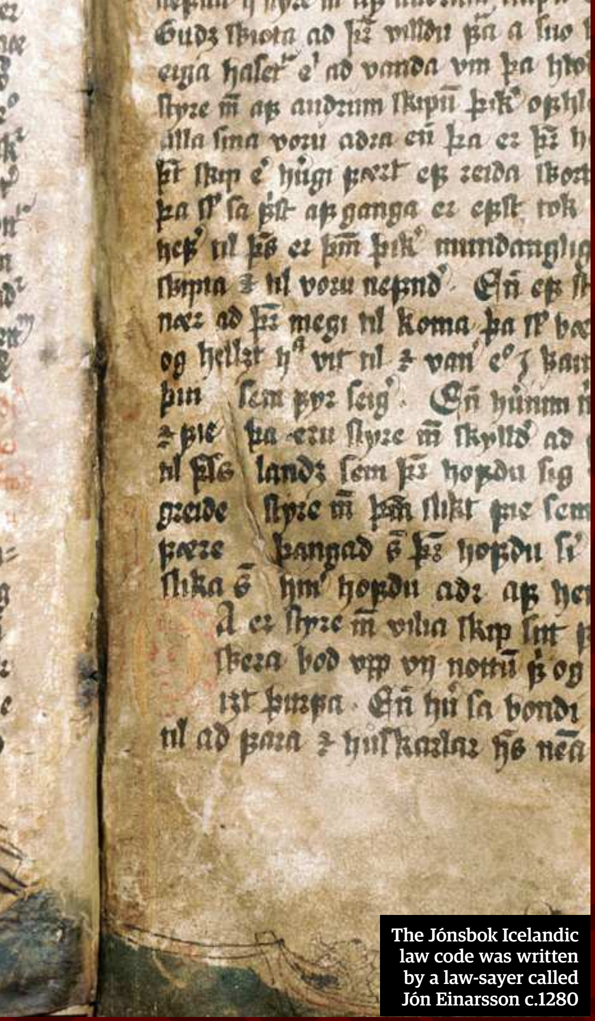
Viking trials were often held in a convenient or well-known place, such as a field or a prominent mound that was easily found by those travelling from all over the region.

In the dock

With no laws against 'the state' as such, most trials were brought by one individual against another or their family regarding property, honour, or the breaking of an arrangement or oath.

Wealth and power

The chief, who was often elected and from one of the community's wealthier families, would preside over the trial. Unfortunately, chiefs were not above being bribed or passing judgements in their own self-interest.



The Jónsbok Icelandic law code was written by a law-sayer called Jón Einarsson c.1280

individual. The law-sayer would then guide the jury, reciting the relevant laws and pointing out legal precedents from previous disputes. However, they were not lawyers – the law-sayer was supposed to be objective and it was instead up to the relevant parties to prosecute and defend themselves. The law-sayer would be elected by the Allthing legislature and serve a three-year term.

Just as we swear oaths today, there are records of witnesses doing just that on a bloodied ring and so in the eyes of the community and the gods they were bound by honour. There is some speculation this was in some way connected to Ullr, the god of archery who skiied across the heavens and, like the god Tyr, represented fairness and justice. A shrine to Ullr has been uncovered along with 65 rings upon which it is thought vows were made before they were buried.

Oath-breaking was serious in the Viking Age and those accused of perjury were sentenced to a trial of ordeal. For example, one witness charged with lying had to build an archway. If they could pass beneath it without it collapsing, they were innocent because the gods had smiled on them. However, these ordeals could be much tougher with trials like walking across hot coals, carrying heated rocks or plunging hands into

> “The law-sayer would be elected by the Allthing”

Vicious Viking punishments

Everything has a price

To the Vikings, everything and everyone had a price. When setting a fine for the guilty, a number of things would be taken into consideration such as the status of the individual and their ability to pay. They would also ensure that the amount was proportionate to the injustice done to the injured party. Quite often any fine would be split between the injured party, the local community and the chieftain or king, but was open to corruption.

Prove your innocence

In later years, after being converted to Christianity, Vikings could face trial by fire. This could take the form of walking across hot coals, carrying heated rocks or plunging hands into boiling water to pick out a hot iron. Should the wounds be clean and without infection after three days, it was taken as a sign that God had intervened and the accused was then immediately proven innocent.

A warning to others

Viking slaves had no rights but Icelandic law did make provisions for how to punish offending thralls in the most harrowing way possible. The Grey Goose Laws stipulated that if a slave killed their master and tried to run away, they should have their arms and legs cut off but be allowed to live as long as they could as a warning to other slaves not to rebel.

Paying with your life

While some thralls were foreigners captured in raids, others were Vikings who had committed a serious crime or had debts they could not pay. Slaves had no rights, had to obey their masters at all times and were often harshly treated. In fact, the punishment of being downgraded to a thrall also came with an implicit threat: it was not a crime for a Viking to kill their own slave.

Exiled into the wilderness

To be dishonest or dishonourable was a grave crime among the Vikings and it was punished severely. If the accused was sentenced to be put outside the law, or outlawed, it would be almost as serious as a death sentence. But there were two levels of outlaw – a semi-outlaw would be banished for a period of three years but still keep his property and possessions to return to, while a full outlaw would lose everything.

Pay the ultimate price

Crimes like premeditated murder were almost always punished by death. While beheading was the most common form of execution, a particularly gruesome way to go was called the 'blood eagle'. The victim's ribs and lungs were pulled out of their back to create a pair of wings that 'fluttered' bird-like as they died. There are only two recorded victims of this death and they were both charged with killing Danish king Ivarr the Boneless' father.

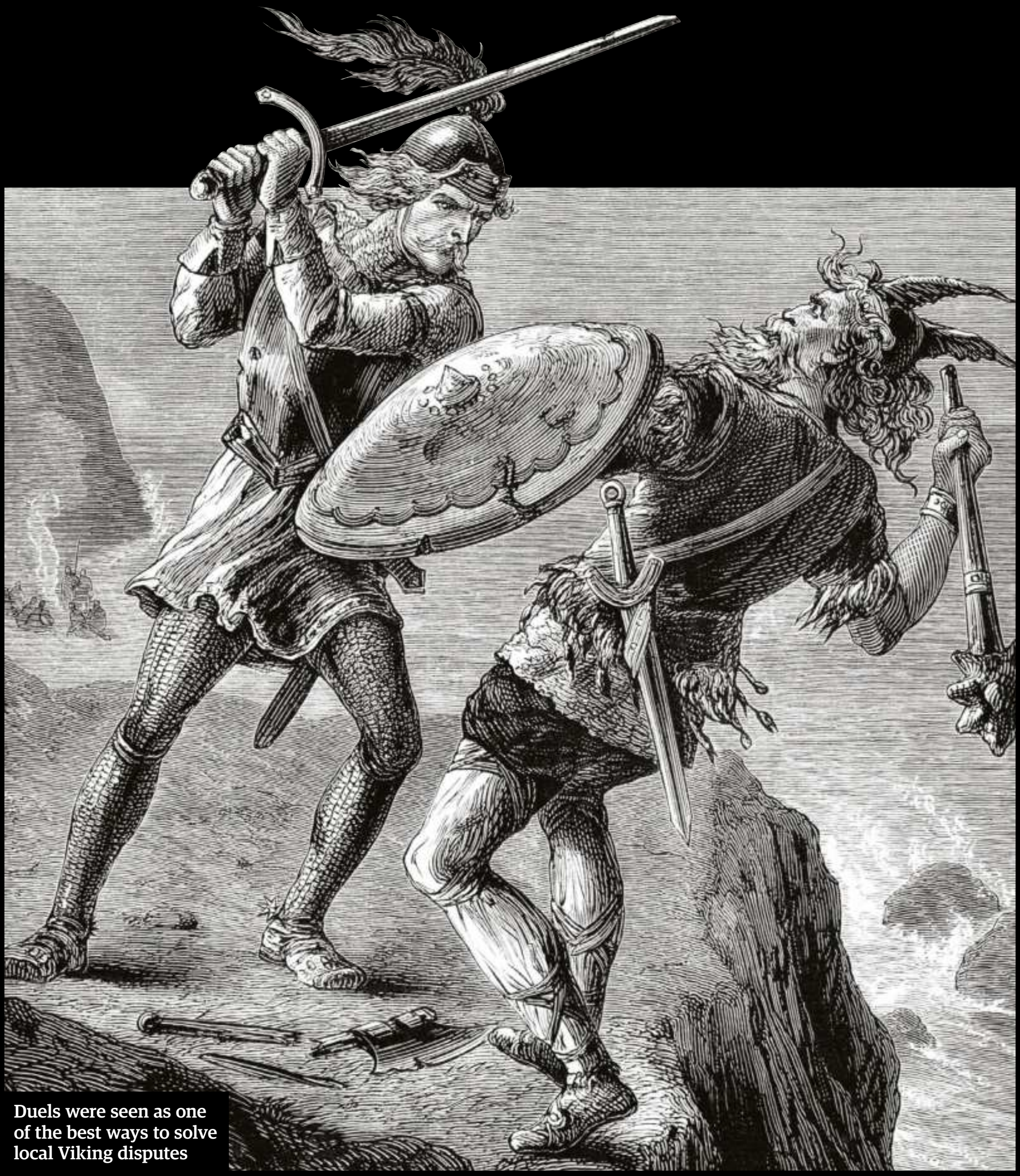
Fight for your rights

Holmgang – a ritual duel – was the most effective way of settling disputes in the Viking Age

For a society that had so much pride and honour at stake, Viking Age disputes could just as often be settled by a test of arms. Before the ritualised duelling of holmgang took off, Norsemen could settle their differences in a far less formal type of smackdown known as einvigi.

With no rules or set weapons, no moderators and no set arena, einvigi (meaning 'single combat') could be called to settle beef or establish fault in some dispute, and offered a release valve from the self-destructive patterns of feud, raid and retaliation that could destroy whole communities. If someone was killed in a duel, their family would be paid weregeld ('man price') in compensation and the matter was considered settled.

In an attempt to curb this bloodshed, the holmgang (meaning 'island-going') was introduced and with it strict rules that were set by the Thing. Of course the Norse world was a large one with communities settled in lands stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Irish Sea and the biting North Atlantic Ocean, so the finer details inevitably differed from location to location.



Duels were seen as one of the best ways to solve local Viking disputes

1. The challenge is issued

The terms would be set down as part of the challenge, with the fighters agreeing on how much the loser would pay. Most communities had a space set aside for ritual combat, often a sacred grove or holy site, or a literal island or islet (hence the name). The fight would take place three to seven days after the challenge and to signal the start of combat, the challenger would recite the agreed terms. To refuse to accept would be seen as an unthinkable lack of honour.

2. The stage is set

The arena was marked out by staking down cloaks or ox hide covering approximately six square metres in surface area – a symbolic island that replaced the earlier literal ones later on in the Viking Age. Treading outside of the arena was an automatic defeat – and a cowardly one, at that – and the spectators would jeer any step backwards towards the area's edge. The four corners of the square were marked with hazel staves and it is possible that the driving in of the stakes formed part of a religious ritual.

3. The fighters tool up

Both combatants were issued with a single light sword and a shield. In some cases, a second sword could be looped around the fighter's wrist on a thong. Religious rites that were designed to prevent evil magic from blunting the fighters' blades – a sure sign you're dealing with a berserker – added a certain level of spiritual protection along with the more conventional tools. Some sagas also offer alternative weapons, suggesting that the rules varied.

4. The fight begins

In Icelandic law, the fighters would take it in turns to strike at each other, with the challenged party going first and the challenger attempting to parry with his sword or shield, before taking his turn. In Norway, the fighters simply had at it, hacking at each other with abandon.

5. Call for back-up

Each fighter was accompanied by a shieldbearer, who carried two spare shields for resupply when their partner's flimsy offering shattered. He could even directly intervene with a shield to protect his fighter – and, with a bit of quick thinking, seriously affect the outcome by twisting and breaking a sword stuck in the wood. For this reason, fighters often prioritised smashing their opponent's shields and forcing the shieldbearer out of play.

6. Blood is drawn

Combat may have been close and originally holmgang duels *were* fights to the death, but because of the proximity it was actually quite difficult to deliver a killing blow – just as well, as death in Holmgang could lead to a feud that was exactly the sort of self-perpetuating carnage the ritual was designed to avoid. Instead, the fighters duke it out until the first splash of blood hit cloak.

7. Blood is shed

After the warriors have settled their accounts, a bull would be slaughtered to appease the god Odin in his role as the deity of death – a reminder that when a Norseman enters battle, he does so to take a life. Both challengers might have a bull waiting in the wings, or perhaps a third party would provide one to whoever emerged victorious from the fight.

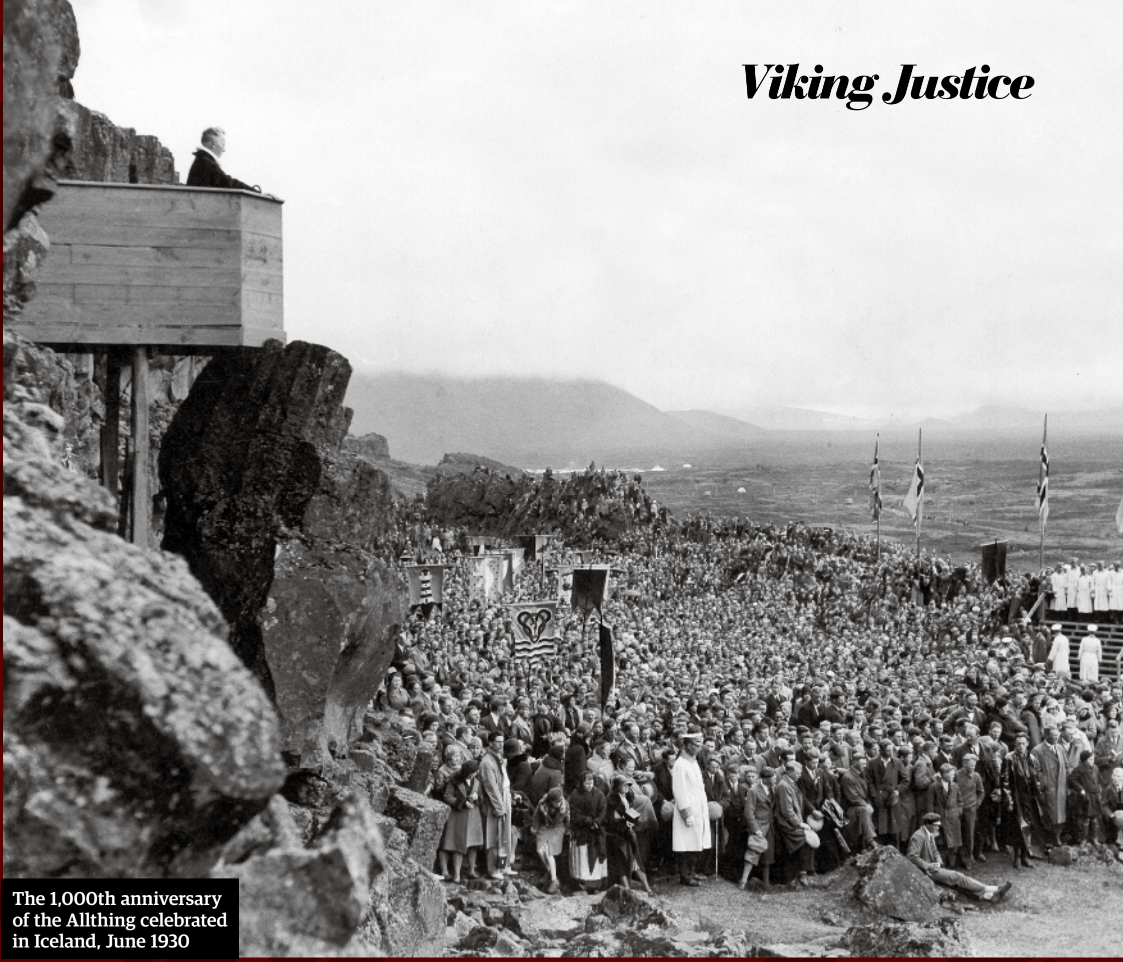
boiling water to pick out a hot iron. If their burns didn't become infected within three days, they were innocent.

Besides perjury, the Thing had to contend with jury tampering. Powerful clans might bribe or threaten violence against free men to sway their votes. Sometimes it was even more insidious: free men might be more favourable to clans they owed some allegiance to or they could be prejudiced against sworn enemies.

Not unlike modern trials, the dispute was concluded when the jury unanimously voted on the best way to resolve it. The chieftain would then consider this when making a judgement. However, a crucial difference is that even though the Thing would decide upon a dispute and pass a sentence, it was not the assembly's responsibility to carry it out - this was down to the family of the injured party, and it could take several different forms. On one level there was civilised discussion and an agreement made between the two parties, sometimes using an accepted third person as an arbitrator and often ending in a fine. But the nature of the crime sometimes called for much more drastic and severe punishments.

The ultimate price to pay for a Viking was to be outlawed from society. Those partially outlawed for three years had their home and possessions to return to, but to be fully outlawed, cast out, dishonoured and lose all worldly wealth was difficult to endure.

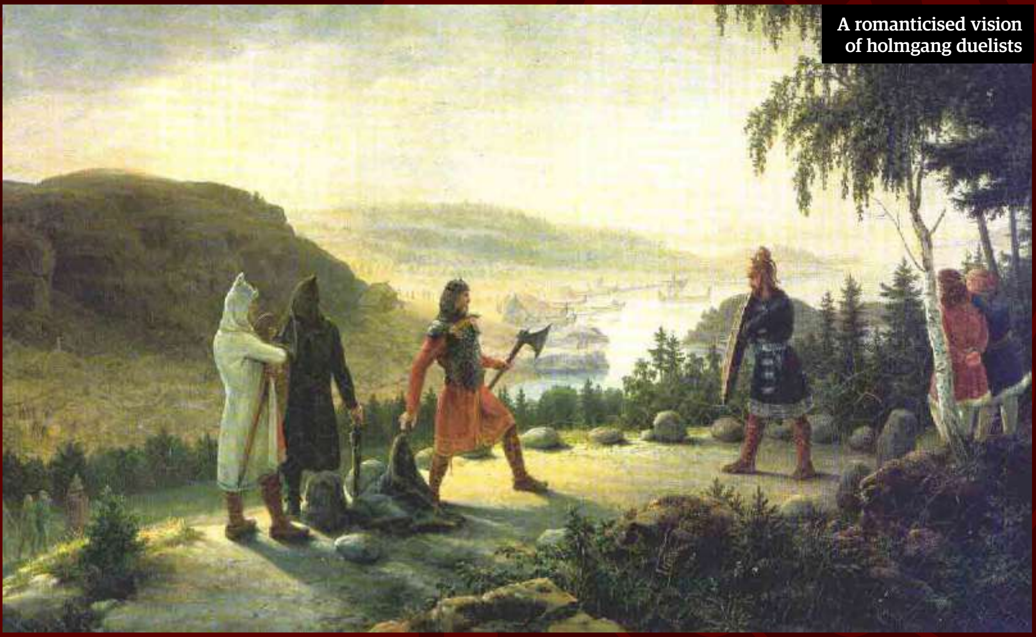
Added to this, tracking down and killing an outlaw wasn't a crime and so many would flee to other lands to escape such a fate. It was better than falling prey to ambitious individuals who sought to improve their status and standing in the community by carrying out their own death sentences in this way.



The 1,000th anniversary of the Allthing celebrated in Iceland, June 1930

"The ultimate price to pay for a Viking was to be outlawed from society"

Another way of distributing justice was in hand-to-hand combat - a holmgang, or duel - but there was no guarantee of justice being on the side of the right. In simple Viking terms, the gods favoured the righteous and so the outcome was seen as justice being carried out. In reality, the result rested purely on the skills of those taking part and it could be a very uneven match. But it was possible for one of the parties to appoint a substitute or champion in their place and thereby possibly swing the fight in their favour. Either way, in the eyes of the gods it was always the winner who was in the right and the means justified the end.



A romanticised vision of holmgang duelists

However, Viking notions of which crimes deserved a fine and those that required capital punishments were very different from ours today. Taking responsibility for one's own actions was considered paramount. If you did something wrong, you had to admit to it and then you could defend yourself at the Thing, which was the honourable way to handle it.

You could even get away with murder - if you did it in broad daylight and didn't flee the scene, you would get a lighter sentence. Erik the Red killed two men in around 982 in Drangar, Iceland. He did not run and was exiled for three years. This worked out in his favour as he discovered Greenland while he was gone.

In contrast, theft was a heinous crime because stealing involves hiding one's action. Grettir the Strong was almost hung for stealing two sheep when he was a starving outlaw in the 11th century. This form of execution was very rare and considered particularly shameful. Slander could also carry a death sentence. Viking law dictated that to use insults that suggested another was unmanly or effeminate - for example, calling someone cowardly - gave a warrior the legal right to challenge their accuser to a duel.

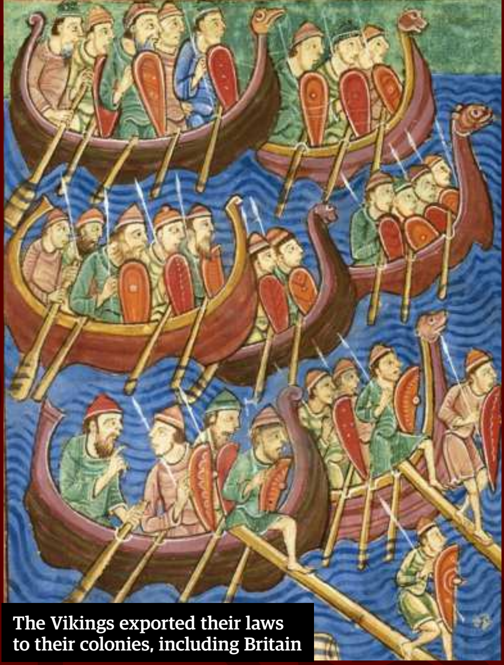
Viking law clearly did not see piracy against foreigners as crime, but then again neither did Elizabethan England hundreds of years later. Nonetheless, Viking raiding eventually gave way to settlements across early Medieval Europe.

The Norwegians settled in Scotland, Ireland and Iceland; the Swedes in Russia, the Baltic and Eastern Europe; the Danes in England and France.

With the flourishing of Viking settlements came the spread of their laws. Archaeological evidence for Things have been found in the Isle of Man, the Faroe Islands, Scotland and beyond. In many of these places, honorary Things still assemble.

In England, meanwhile, the Danelaw represented a geographical area negotiated through various battles and treaties but it was the foundation of many aspects of modern law that we know today. Far from being oppressed and enslaved, the parts of England under Viking rule continued to thrive and there's no evidence that the Danelaw was any more lawless than neighbouring Wessex. In fact, Viking justice has left a legacy that endures to this day – the English word 'law' derives directly from Old Norse.

As a system of law and order, the Thing had its faults, such as being open to corruption and overly reliant on an unswerving belief in the will of the gods. But it was inclusive, giving the ordinary man a voice and placing the strong Viking values of honour and fairness at its core. It was this strength that was to carry it through many years of change, ensuring that smash-and-grab raiders could spread their influence throughout entire countries and on through the centuries to the enduring legacy that we have today.

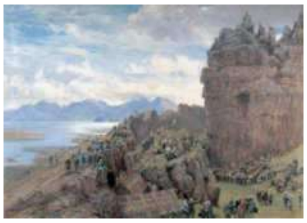


The Vikings exported their laws to their colonies, including Britain

The law of the land Where Vikings went, Things followed

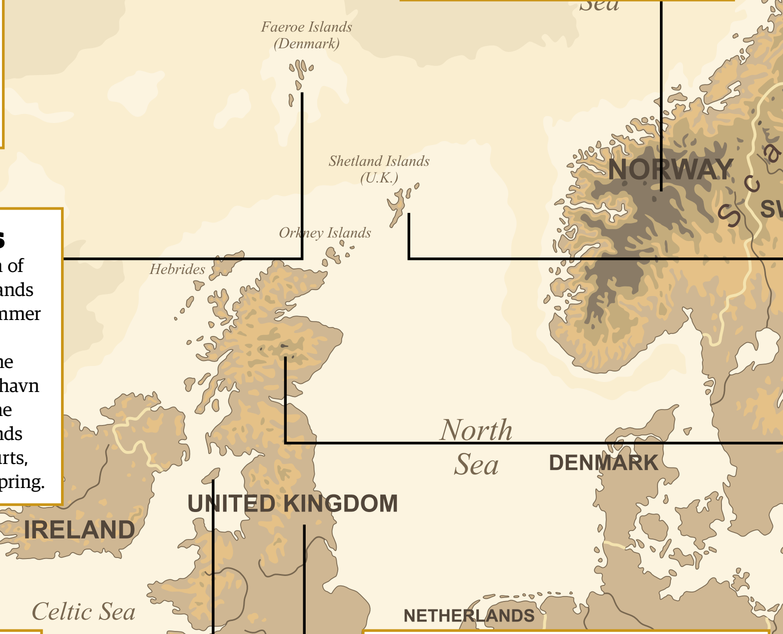
Thingvellir, Iceland

Established in 930, the Allthing was held in the Icelandic region of Thingvellir for 850 years from 930 until 1798. The assembly would meet for two weeks at the Lögberg ('Law Rock') each year. Nearby Drowning Pool and Gallows Rock hint at some of the grimmer aspects of the proceedings.



Gulatinget, Norway

The largest and oldest assembly in Norway was held in Gulen in around 900-1300. The Gulating served as a model for the Things held in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, and the Gulating Code of Law remains the oldest known Nordic body of laws.



Tingwall, Shetland

A small promontory on Tingwall Loch called Tingaholm was the site of Shetland's local parliament until the late 16th century. Officials are thought to have sat around a rough stone table, while delegates gathered on the slope below the nearby church.

Tinganes, Faroe Islands

The free men of the Faroe Islands met each summer on a rocky outcrop on the shore of Tórshavn from 825 until 1816, though by that time meetings had moved indoors. The islands were also administered by six local courts, known as 'thingsteads', which met in spring.

Dingwall, Scotland

This Highland meeting place was established by Thornfinn the Mighty, a powerful Viking earl who died in 1065. Its location was long lost but archaeologists uncovered evidence of it beneath a car park in 2013.

Tynwald Hill, Isle of Man

The traditional meeting place of the Manx parliamentary assembly is in the village of Saint John's. Though established by the Vikings a millennium ago, the mound is thought to have been built in the 13th century.

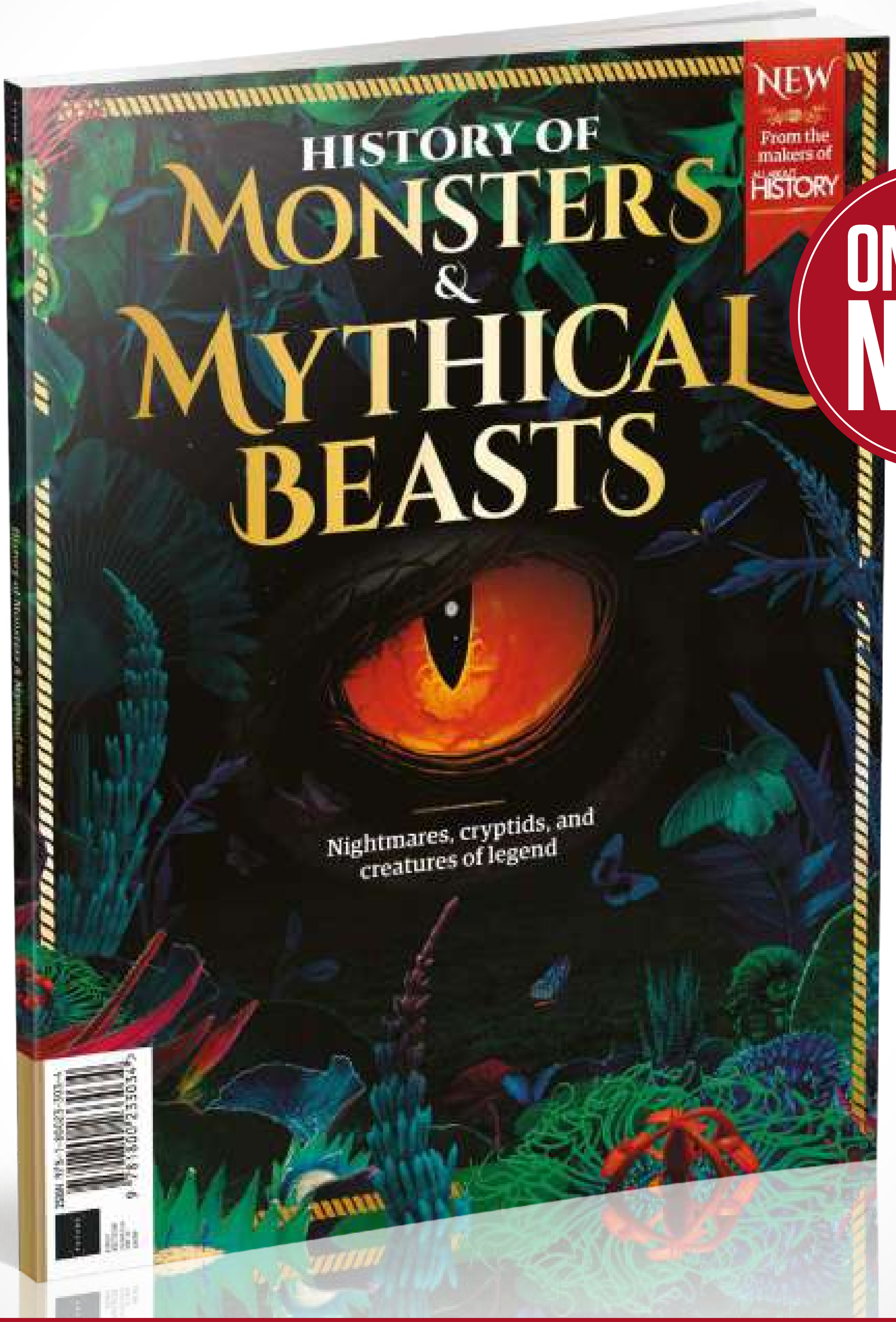
Fingay Hill, England

York was the seat of Viking power in England, so it's perhaps no surprise that evidence a Thing has been found nearby. Other English Thing sites include Thingwala in Whitby and Dingbell Hill in Northumbria.

Images: Getty Images, Google Maps, Richard Hoare(Tingwell) Bob Embleton (Tynwald Hill) CC BY-SA 2.0, Erik Christensen (Tinganes) CC BY-SA 3.0

DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S UNDER YOUR BED?

They come from all over the world: from the deserts of Africa to the forests of Europe; from the highest mountains of Asia to the bottom of the cold northern seas. Discover the lore and legends of monsters and mythical beasts.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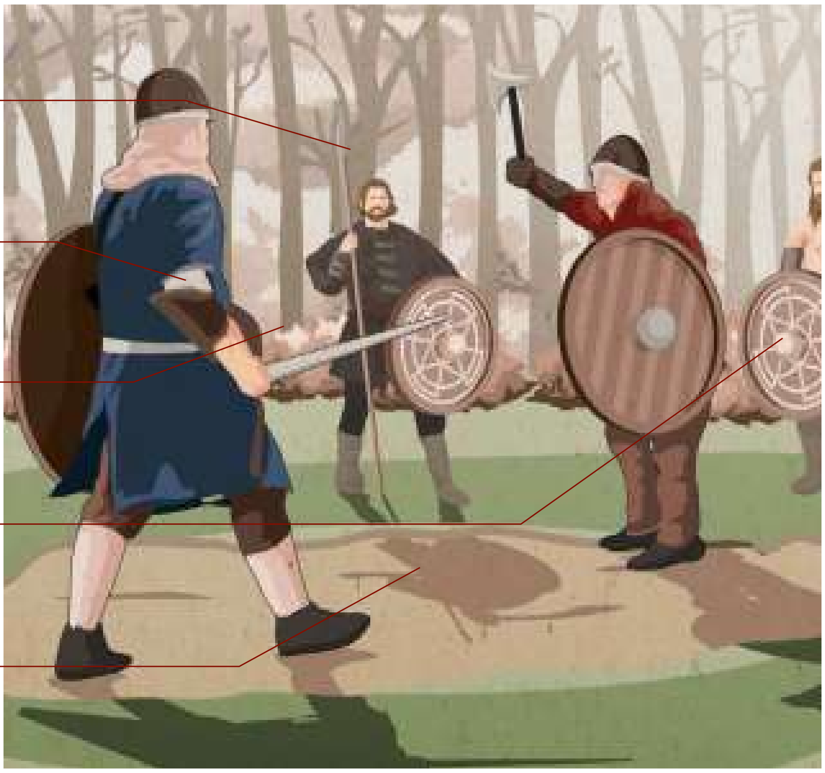
How to
Survive Trial by Combat

Stack the odds in your favour

For a society that had so much pride and honour at stake, Viking Age disputes were often settled by a test of arms. However, rather than stemming from a sudden clash of flaring tempers between warriors, these trials by combat were carefully considered by local assemblies. They listened to a challenger's claims regarding stolen property, besmirched honour or the breaking of an oath before deciding if it warranted a duel - or holmgang, as it was called. These fights were also governed by strict rules, but carried a very real risk of injury for either contender.



Watching for blood

The combat would end when blood fell on a cloak laid on the ground. Watchers would hail victory at this point.

Protective clothing

Most wounds were to the thigh, leg or arms, with those taking part using armour to lessen the chance of death.

Weapon of choice

The sword was most commonly used, with many carrying two: one in the hand and a back-up hanging from the wrist.

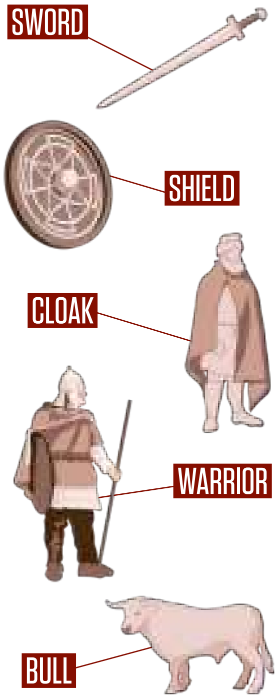
Second fighters

Duellists wouldn't face their opponent alone. They would have a second fighter with shields that they used to protect their man.

Well-defined ring

Fights often took place at a dedicated place like a sacred grove. Combatants had to stay within the confines of an outlined ring.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED...



1 THE CHALLENGE IS ISSUED

The challenger outlines terms, with the fighters agreeing on how much the loser will pay. But the rules of combat could vary from region to region, so if you're from out of town make sure to pay attention when the elder known as the law-sayer outlines what weapons you can use, who can strike first and exactly what constitutes defeat.

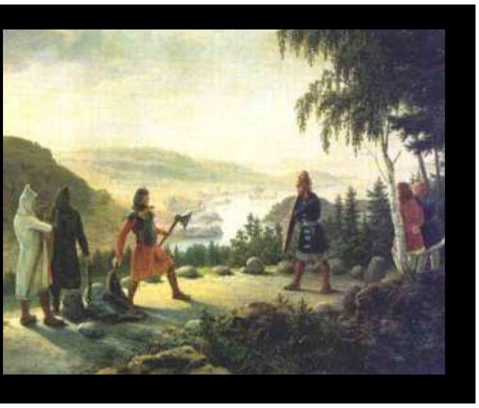
2 WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS

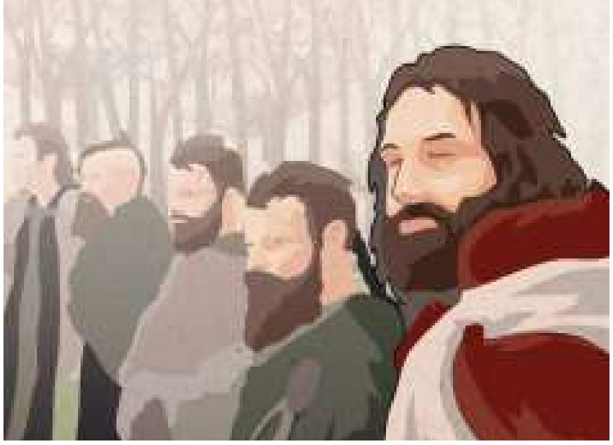
It's also important to figure out what you'll get if you win. If the stakes are high enough that you stand to profit, go ahead and agree to the rules. Alternatively, you can duck out and admit defeat, but such an act would be seen as cowardice, a crime in Viking society which carries its own punishment, including exile.

How not to... become labelled a coward

Running away from a holmgang was bad enough but if you were the one who had issued the challenge in the first place, then deciding not to show up at the duel was the worst thing you could do. In such instances, the person would be outlawed and they would be forever labelled a niðingr. Effectively bestowing the social stigma of a coward, this badge of dishonour would turn the person into a reviled villain. After all, by calling for a holmgang, the challenger had accused someone of wrongdoing yet sought to avoid the courts. To run at this point, suggested the challenger was at fault in the matter at hand.

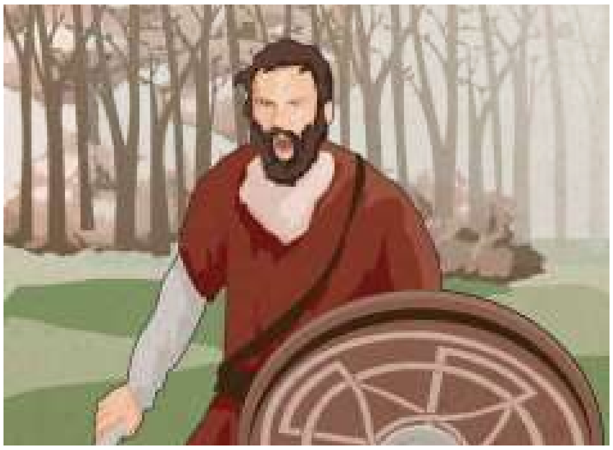
It was also seen as dishonourable to put one foot outside of the small fighting area - something that was classed as flinching. Should this be done with two feet, however, the uproar would be much greater because it too would be considered as fleeing. The fighter may as well not have turned up at all.





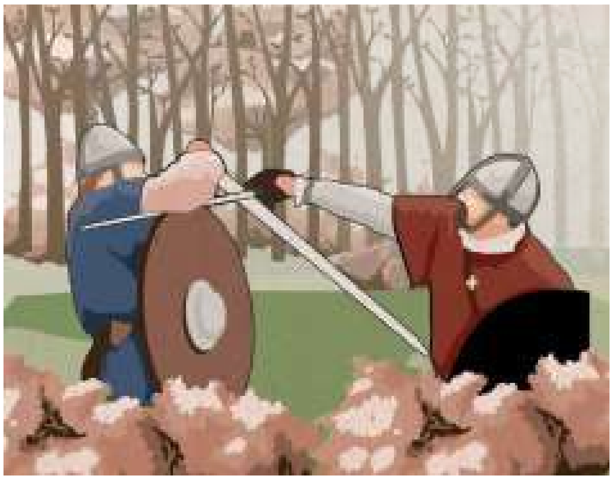
3 CHOOSE YOUR CHAMPION

If you feel that your opponent is clearly going to outclass you in a duel, then you may want to enlist a volunteer to fight on your behalf. Go for a capable warrior or your muscular son to even things up a bit. Should you be roughly equal to your opponent, though, you'll unfortunately have to get your own hands dirty.



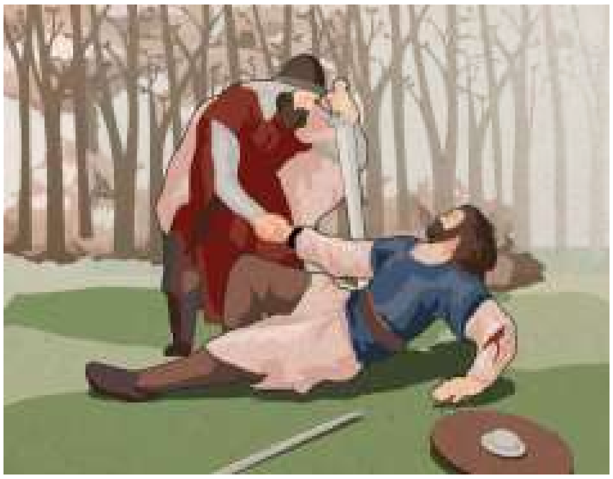
4 TIME TO TOOL UP

Combatants have a single light sword and a shield. In some cases, a second sword could be looped around the wrist on a thong. Some sagas also mention clubs, spears and axes, which again suggests a regional variation in the rules. Religious rites designed to prevent evil magic from blunting the fighters' blades added a certain level of spiritual protection.



5 FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS

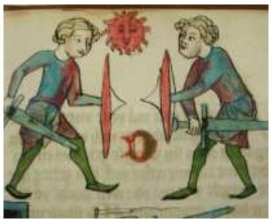
In Icelandic law, the fighters take it in turns to strike each other with the challenged party going first and the challenger attempting to parry. Norwegian combatants simply hacked at each with abandon. Consider shattering your opponent's shield - it will only take a strong blow as they are made of light wood - to leave them open to your attacks.



6 BLOOD IS SHED

Killing each other is generally avoided in holmgang, although you will get immunity if you do accidentally slay your opponent. Instead you only need to draw first blood to win, so aim for the unprotected parts of your opponent's body and you should soon triumph. After you've settled your accounts, remember to slay a bull to appease Odin.

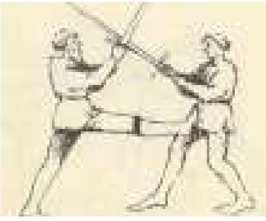
4 FAMOUS... TYPES OF DUEL



JUDICIAL DUELS

EUROPE 700S

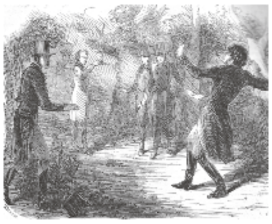
If a witness or confession could not settle an accusation between two large parties, then a trial by combat could.



CODE-GOVERNED DUELS

ITALY 1409

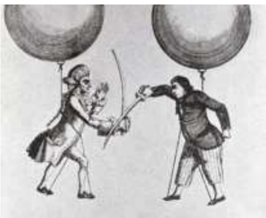
The Flos Duellatorum was the first known example of a set of rules for duels, and it covered techniques from unarmed wrestling to mounted swordfighting.



FIREARM DUELS

IRELAND 1777

The adoption of the Irish Code Duello, consisting of 25 clear rules, made single combat with pistols much more popular.



BALLOON DUEL

FRANCE 1808

The French proved surprisingly innovative at duelling, using gas balloons to shoot each above Paris in 1808. Two Frenchman also fought with billiard balls in 1843.

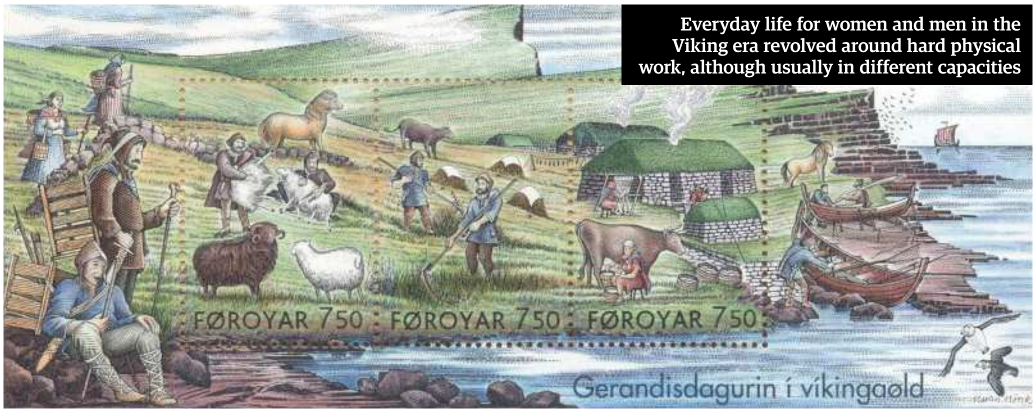
Images: Ed Crooks, Getty Images

Women in the Viking Age

It wasn't just Viking women who had rights and privileges in Medieval Europe – all women did

Written by Edoardo Albert

While shieldmaidens appear quite often in Norse literature, in reality they were extremely rare, if not non-existent



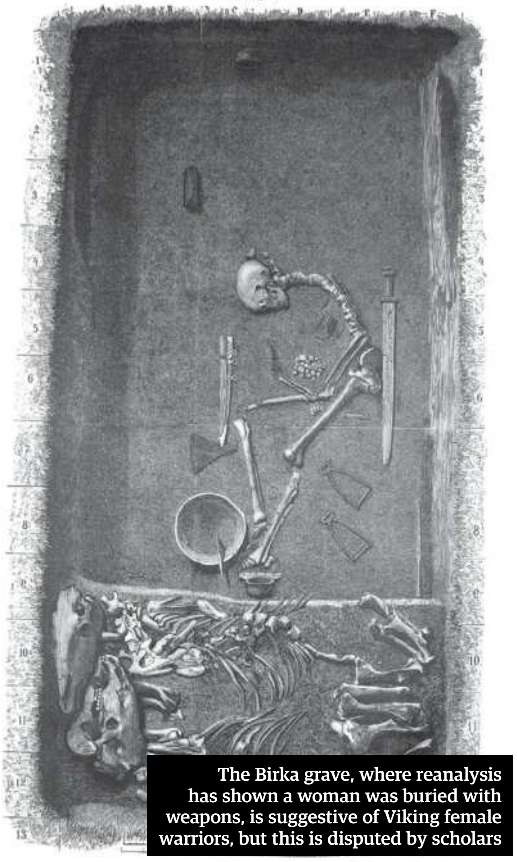
Everyday life for women and men in the Viking era revolved around hard physical work, although usually in different capacities

On TV and online you will see programmes and articles stating, as fact, that women in Viking society enjoyed significantly greater rights and privileges than other Medieval women. This is nonsense. In fact, women throughout the European medieval world enjoyed far greater rights and privileges than had ever accrued to women before, with if anything greater status afforded to the women in Christian Europe than in the pre-conversion Viking world.

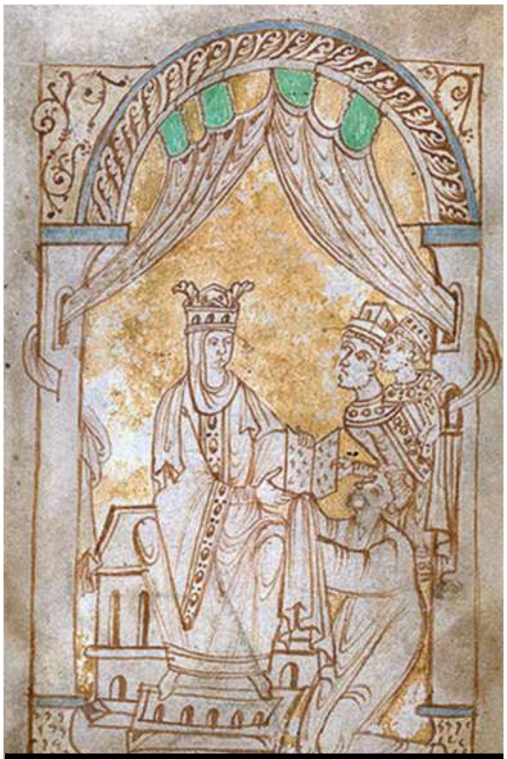
The key thing to remember when thinking of the Medieval world was that it was hierarchical. The gender stereotypes that obsess modern thinking had little purchase: what counted was where you stood in the social hierarchy – and hierarchy trumped gender completely. So, for example, in Anglo-Saxon England, the weregild ('blood price') payable as compensation for killing someone depended on social status but was the same for a man and a woman who shared the same status. Thus a high-status woman would, quite literally, lord it over anybody who was her social inferior, of whatever sex. This is not to say that there were not typical gender roles. There were. But social status counted for far more than sex.

Within the Viking world, women's roles revolved around the home and farm in what was a thinly spread society. One exceptional aspect of Norse society was that women could initiate divorce as well as men, and if the wife wanted a divorce on the grounds of her husband's misbehaviour, the erring husband had to pay her compensation so that she could provide for herself when a single woman. There are a number of accounts, written by Muslim travellers to the north, that remark on this with incredulity – no such latitude was permitted within Islamic society at the time.

"A high-status woman would, quite literally, lord over her social inferiors"



The Birka grave, where reanalysis has shown a woman was buried with weapons, is suggestive of Viking female warriors, but this is disputed by scholars



Emma of Normandy, perhaps the most eminent Viking woman of them all, was sensitive to PR. Worried that her enemies might slander her behind her back, she commissioned her own biography

As far as going viking was concerned – vikingar, the sailing off in search of trade and plunder that gave the Norse their wider name – it was a men-only enterprise. However, depending on what these traders, explorers and plunderers found, their women and families might later accompany them, enabling Vikings to settle Iceland, Greenland and, briefly, North America. But men going viking to Iceland needed women because the land they found was uninhabited: this was not the case with places like Orkney and Shetland. There, recent DNA studies show the Vikings killed the local men and took the surviving women as their wives and concubines. In other cases, women might be imported as slaves.

Slave trading was one of the key sources of Norse wealth and women, as concubines, were a key part of this trade. In fact, the conversion of the Vikings to Christianity, with the Church insisting (admittedly not always successfully) that a man, whatever his status, be limited to one woman for life, was a key factor in raising the social status of women within Norse society. Few things reduce the status of women more than polygamy and concubinage, and the acceptance by Viking men of the ideal – if not always the practice – of life-long marriage served both to raise the status of women and reduce the practice of slave taking, of which the Church also strongly disapproved.

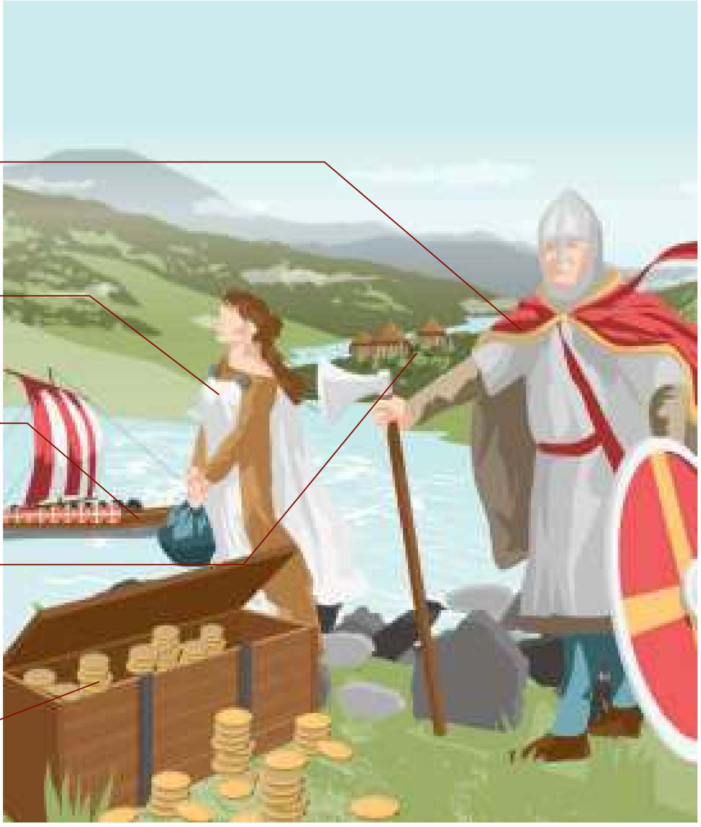
While Viking society placed a high value on law, women were not permitted to speak in court except to represent a man, nor to appear as witnesses in court. Women could, however, hold property and pass it on to their heirs through inheritance. While exceptional women made lives for themselves throughout the Viking age, the conversion to Christianity allowed these women to flourish as never before. Aud the Deep-Minded, a Hebridean Viking princess, married one of the Dublin Vikings, but when he died she took herself, her granddaughters and her household to Iceland, becoming one of the key early settlers of the country. And in the 11th century, Emma of Normandy, the wife of two kings and mother of two more, showed how a Christian Norse queen could play a pivotal role in the power politics of the time.

A final caveat. That idea, beloved of certain TV shows, of female Viking warriors dealing out sharp-bladed death to their enemies. It's false. At the most, there may have been very occasional female Viking warriors, although even that very limited possibility is questionable. But the idea of women fighting alongside male warriors as a matter of course is simply not true.

How to Build a Viking Settlement

These fierce Northmen were skilled settlers as well as warriors

The Viking Age was a time of great upheaval in Medieval Europe. Raiders from the north threatened to overwhelm parts of England and France, with attacks reaching as far as the Mediterranean. Although the Vikings had primarily come to plunder, they also looked to settle in these new lands that provided them with fertile soil for their crops. Well-known cities like Dublin, York and Reykjavík were founded by Vikings and began life as small settlements, expanding over time to become thriving communities and centres of trade and commerce throughout the region.



Military force

To make your mark on the new land you will need a large force, around 60 longships should do.

Slaves

Slavery will only start to diminish in the British Isles after 1066 and is very lucrative for the Vikings.

Longboat

The backbone of your expeditionary force, a longboat's ability to travel inland via rivers will be extremely useful.

Farming

Farmland in Scandinavia is often of poorer quality than that found in the rest of Europe. Make sure to plant to harvest crops to feed your people.

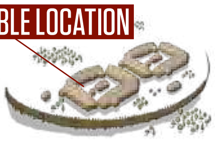
Bribery

Native chiefs take to paying off Viking war-bands to avoid violence; the money will come in useful when it comes to building a new town.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED...

ARMY

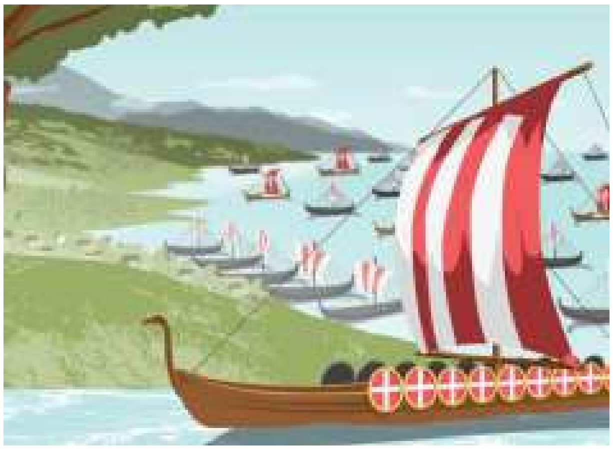
SUITABLE LOCATION



TRADING COMMODITIES

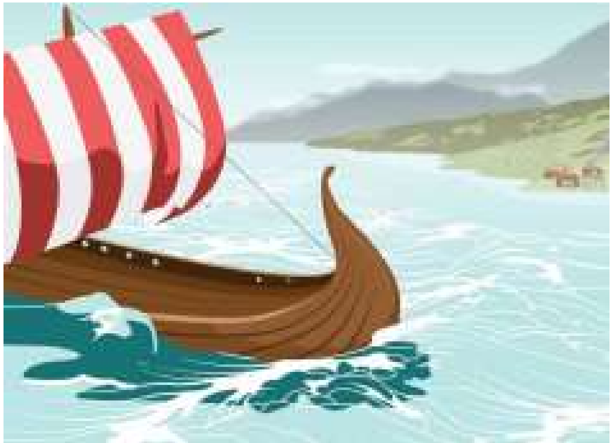
LONGSHIPS

FAMILY



1 ASSEMBLE YOUR ARMY

Founding a settlement in a foreign country is going to take a lot of manpower. The larger the fleet you can gather, the more men you have to take and secure the settlement. Having your ships nearby also gives you access to water-bound trade and raw materials, should you need to use them for construction in your new home.



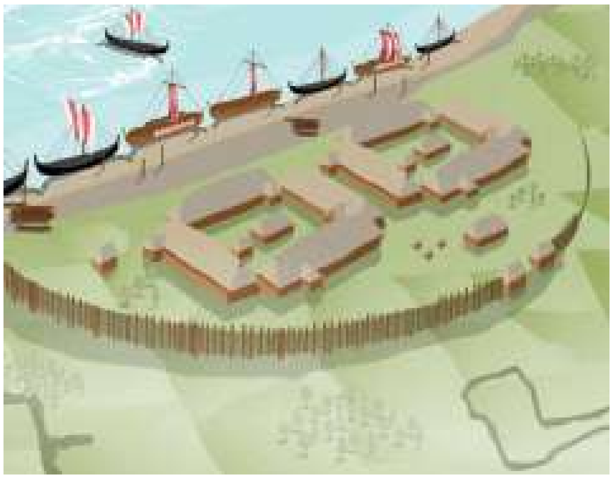
2 SCOUTING YOUR LOCATION

Some locations are better than others, so to assess whether a region is worth occupying, it is a good idea to raid along the coast and scout the lie of the land. As some settlements began as base camps to raid further inland, try looking for locations that have been settled for many years; an old Roman town would be ideal.

How not to... found a settlement

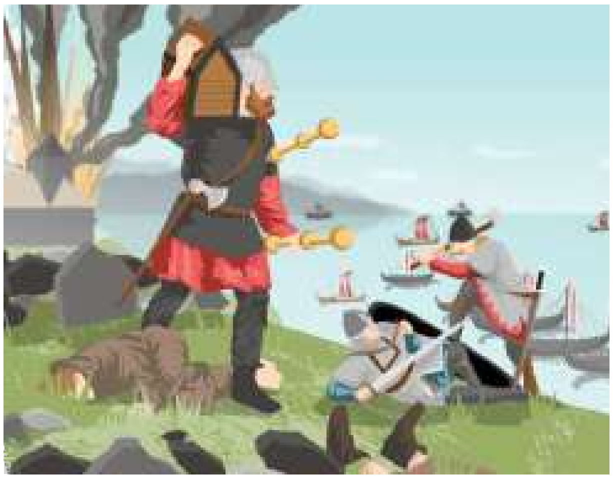
In the 18th century, empire building was in full swing. Major world powers were jostling for control and influence in places like the New World, trying to stamp their authority on unspoiled land. Scotland, being a small country cut off geographically from the rest of Europe, decided that it too would found a colony and become a world player. Panama was chosen as the location and the settlement was to offer an overland route between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The colony, called Caledonia, was doomed from the start, beset by poor planning and bickering leaders. Many economic factors sealed its fate but the killing blow would be a Spanish siege which saw the settlement abandoned by 1700. An estimated 25 per cent of the country's income was tied up in the Darien Scheme, and its failure was seen as a major factor in the Acts of Union of 1707, when Scotland ceased to be an independent nation.

Sambalas
Islands
ISTHMUS OF DARIEN
BAY OF
Pearl Id.
Vallona or Gulph of St. Michael



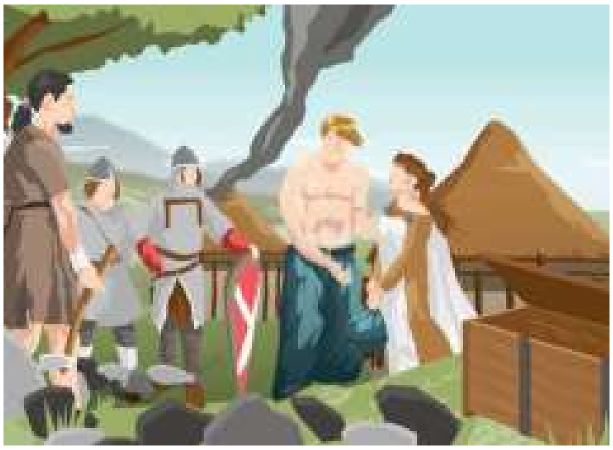
3 LAY THE FOUNDATIONS

To settle land, you'll need to establish a more permanent base at the coast. Building a longphort, or 'ship camp' is a good place to start. By dragging your ships ashore and using them to build outer defences for a camp, you can create a base camp for further raiding or to act as a kernel for a more permanent settlement.



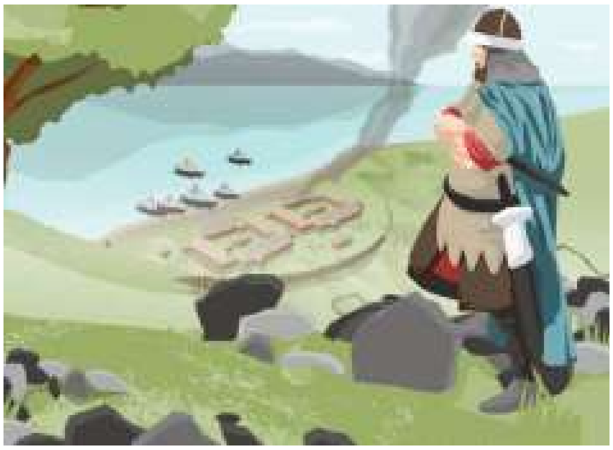
4 RAID, RAID, RAID

It'll probably come as no shock that the local population isn't going to take very kindly to you and your people's intrusion, so organising some raids to harry and harass them is a good idea. Churches can offer wealth and riches, whereas farmland can take care of sustenance while your own crops start to take root.



5 PROSPER

The lifeblood for a settlement is trade, and you should ensure your town becomes central to the region. While furs, wool and other commodities are available, a less salubrious business in the form of slaving offers better returns. These networks stretch all over Europe and reach as far as the Eastern Roman Empire.



6 SURVIVE

With the settlement founded and making money, the last task is to ensure your new home's survival. In this turbulent and violent time, founding a royal dynasty can help to ease the succession of future rulers. You must always be ready to fight for your new home, as rival factions or bands of native warriors are always looking to take what they can.

4 FAMOUS... VIKING SETTLEMENTS

DUBLIN

IRELAND, 841

Founded as a Viking camp in 841, Dublin grew to become a major Irish settlement, with a reputation for a large slave market.

YORK

ENGLAND, 9TH CENTURY

One of the most famous Viking settlements, it is thought York may have been settled since the Mesolithic era.

HEDEBY

GERMANY, 8TH CENTURY

A town built at a vital trade nexus, Hedeby became the centre of commerce in the region until it was abandoned after 1066.

REYKJAVÍK

ICELAND, C.870

Originally founded by Norwegians, Reykjavík was a small farming town that became the centre of Icelandic nationalism.

Images: Ed Crooks, Alamy

What is a Viking Saga?

From voyages to battles, gods to monsters, heroics to cowardice, the Viking sagas have explored all themes in magnificent detail

Written by Joanna Elphick

On spotting the word 'saga' in a title, the reader can be forgiven for having certain expectations about what is to follow. Such a story should be of epic proportions, span many lands, deal with the gamut of human emotions and positively groan under the weight of heroes and villains held within its pages. The Viking sagas offer us nothing less - and often, so much more.

The word 'saga' originates from Old Norse, meaning 'what is said', and this clearly reflects the tradition of the early skalds orally transmitting their stories to an enrapt audience during the cold winter months. The Viking people who dominated northern Europe from the late 8th century were mostly illiterate, so sharing tales was therefore an oral, communal pastime. Professional skalds were paid to entertain at large gatherings, often accompanying a musical interlude and a grand feast. Travelling storytellers would be welcomed into a community to bring the latest news and gossip from further afield. Individual skalds would often align themselves to a particular king, earl or chieftain, spreading details of their master's latest brave exploits. Meanwhile, intimate stories of family histories were told and retold around the firelight at home since a sense of ancestral lineage was highly regarded among the Viking people.

Society was made up of slaves, paid labourers, freehold farmers, nobles and their rulers. While Greenland and Iceland were democratic republics, the majority of Viking nations were warrior kingdoms, and, although the political, power-based landscape was highly misogynistic, women did maintain a certain level of influence, owning property and even holding land rights. Such detailed knowledge of their lifestyles and social norms is entirely down to the stories that have lingered in their minds, and were eventually captured on vellum over the centuries.

The Vikings were a collective group on the move. Originally from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, the migrant people, plunderers, warring armies and canny merchants carried their own culture across the world, leaving their distinctive mark, but also soaked up the customs, religious beliefs and ways of those they came across. This rich, multicultural tapestry is ever-present in the words of the sagas and influences from their travels are abundant. This is particularly true of early Scandinavian literature. An impressive knowledge of the natural geography of northern and western Europe is clearly the result of the itinerant Norsemen. The stories tell us that they discovered Iceland when their own ships were blown off course at around 860 CE. The following year, they were charging across Ireland, Britain, Spain, France and as far as North Africa and Arabia. They were the first seafarers to make it from the Old World to the American continent. Columbus merely walked in their considerable footprints.

And so, for centuries, the Viking sagas were spread word of mouth from man to man, adult to child, via the skalds of the day, incorporating the latest battles, new ideas and information from far-flung locations. Men and women were kept abreast of the latest situations while children were subtly taught the importance of bravery and loyalty to their king and kinsfolk. However, as time progressed, the original tales were overshadowed by newer stories. People wanted to be up to date with the latest news and to hear of strange, foreign lands that had been discovered. Older skalds passed away, leaving younger storytellers to take their place and, as a

The Viking storytellers

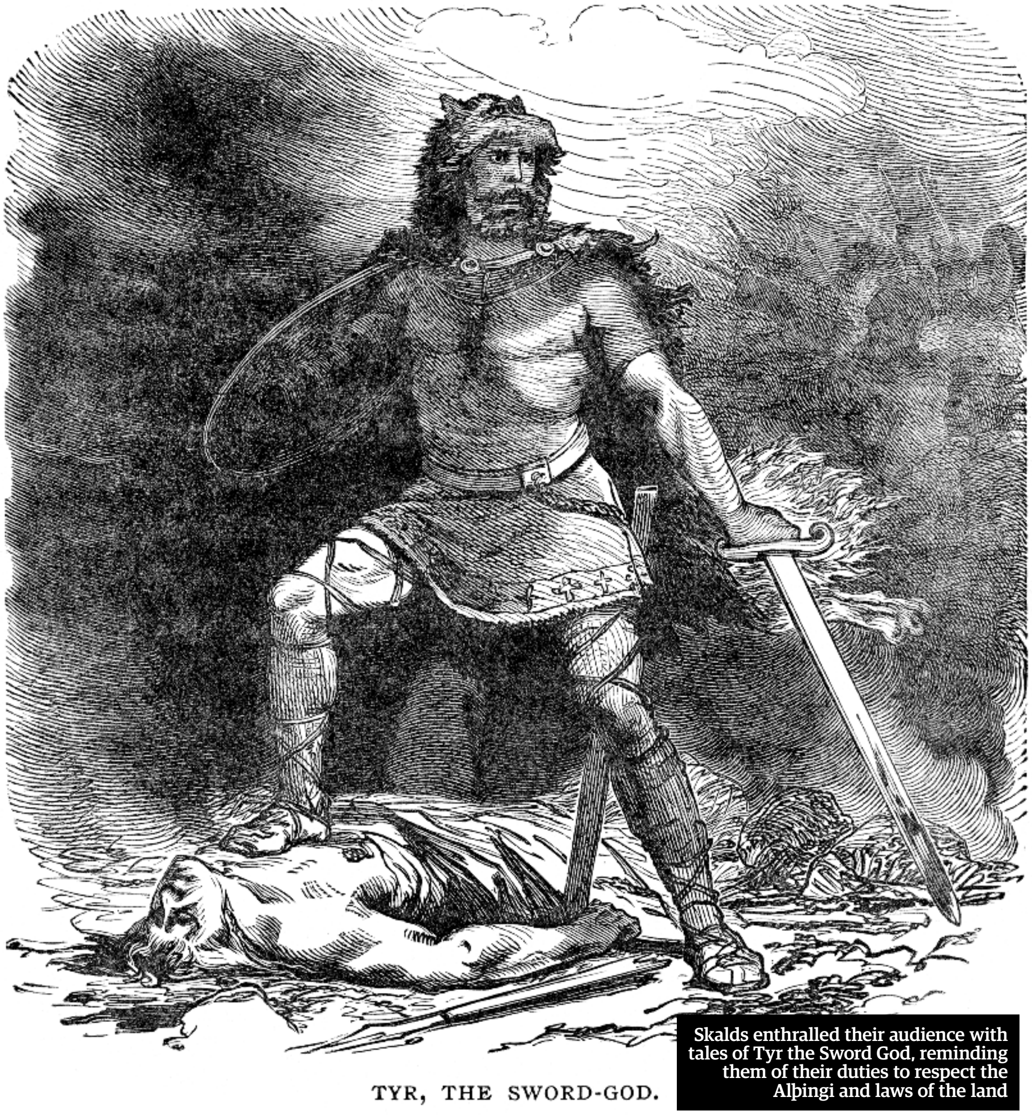
The skalds are often described as being the great entertainers of Viking society but, in fact, they were far more important to their community. Initially, stories and poems were recited by the professional storytellers, passed down from generation to generation and retold from memory alone. Nothing was written down. However, as the Vikings transitioned from pagan beliefs to Christian, writing became more common, and by the 11th century, educated Icelandic people began to record their wondrous tales.

The storytellers had many important roles within the group, pleasing the crowds at gatherings, but also passing on vital lessons to the children. Moral dilemmas, historical facts and geographical knowledge were all woven into the stories, igniting a love of literature, mythology and history. The skalds were there to encourage good behaviour, initiative and honour by regaling their audience with tales of the gods and great Viking heroes. Bravery was to be instilled in the young at every opportunity. So it was that during the long, dark Scandinavian winters the skalds both entertained and educated the people.

Although applauded for their skills, the skalds were also feared by many, since a sarcastic poem could harm reputations. They were often close to the king or local chieftain, advising him and keeping him abreast of social views. In this way, their power was far-reaching. Kings tended to treat their skalds well since it was the storyteller who would ensure their legacy lived on. Some went on to record the laws as they were passed, while others worked alongside the church, recording the miracles of the saints for posterity and spreading the word of Christianity. Gradually, the pagan beliefs were overshadowed by the skalds' stories of Christian values and, to this end, they altered the Viking culture forever.

SNORRI
STURLUSON

Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), an Icelandic poet, historian and politician



TYR, THE SWORD-GOD.

Skalds enthralled their audience with tales of Tyr the Sword God, reminding them of their duties to respect the Alþingi and laws of the land

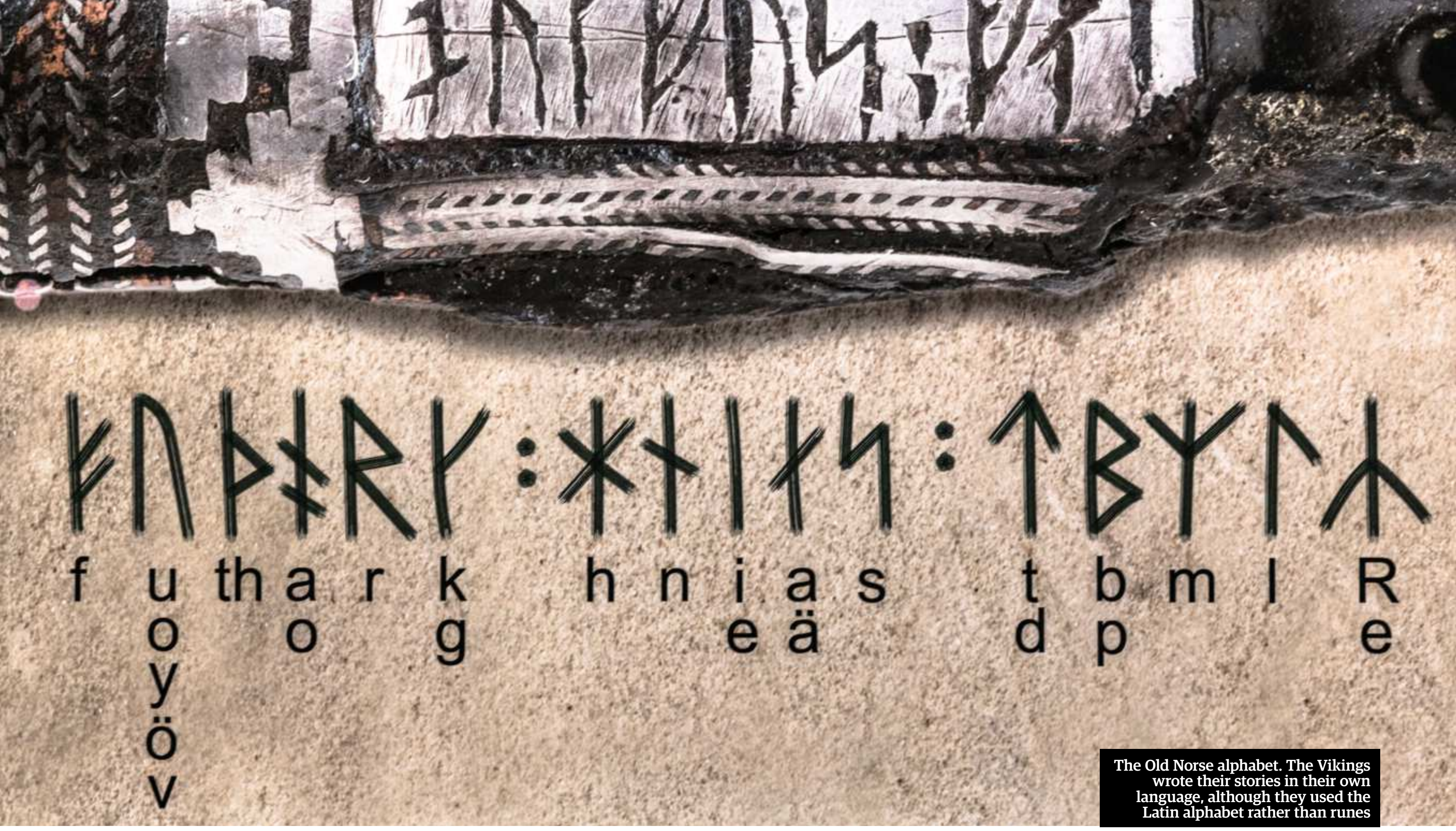
result, for the first time there was a genuine chance that these wondrous sagas might be lost forever. Ironically, it was yet another influence from overseas that would save them from extinction.

In 1000, Iceland gradually shifted away from paganism, rejecting many of its beliefs and customs in favour of Christianity. Missionaries, coming from western Europe, taught the Icelanders to write. Until this point, runes were used for short notes only. Elsewhere across Europe, the educated were learning to write in Latin, as was the custom in Medieval times, reproducing Christian ideals and the laws of the day, but here, in the heart of the Viking people, the Norsemen chose to write in the language of Iceland. No longer would the skalds have to hold the entire Viking culture in their heads.

Throughout the 11th century, the educated Icelandic men began recording their mythologies, histories, poems and stories, and continued to do so up until the end of the 15th century and beyond. Iceland was unique among other European countries at that time since its population consisted of many freeholding farmers. These people, who were financially secure, had the means to commission books and manuscripts in their own language.

The Viking sagas can be loosely compared to the epic tale and, to a lesser degree, the modern literary form of the novel. Epics, by definition, deal with grand heroic themes, as do many sagas, but not all. Some sagas spend considerable time recognising the minor feats of lesser mortals, unseen in epic poems. They are highly distinctive in that they tell of mighty deeds, not necessarily about heroes, but about the common, plain Icelander. Both the novel and the saga narrate a chronological tale but, unlike the typical novel, the saga will often intertwine many narratives together. If a novel does take on multiple storylines, the author will usually attempt to bring them together by the close of the book. This is not the case within the saga, where a storyline may well simply peter out if no longer needed. Such a confusing disappearance of a character is sometimes dealt with by the creator by explaining that a particular character is now 'out of the saga'. A Norse author explained the style by comparing it to running water, which flows from many sources, yet all comes together to flow into a single place, the sea.

The novel spends time building characters and allowing the reader to glimpse his or her inner thoughts and motivations. The skalds gave little



The Old Norse alphabet. The Vikings wrote their stories in their own language, although they used the Latin alphabet rather than runes

time to such techniques. Rather than let us, the readers, see inside the head of a given character, we are shown through the characters' actions what his motives might be. A change of clothes, from light to dark hues for example, should warn the reader that the hero is angry and intends to carry out violent retribution. Other warnings of what is to come may present themselves in the guise of a dream or some other supernatural event. The narrator's voice is rarely, if ever, heard within a saga.

As the skalds proceeded to write down the sagas, different types began to emerge and have been preserved in these distinct groups to this day. One such sub-group, known as the Sagas of the Old Time, or '*Fornaldarsögur*', concentrate on the pre-Christian age in Scandinavia. These are the legendary sagas that joyfully mix ancient mythology with remote history. Here, the emphasis is on entertainment with little attempt at historical accuracy. The Christian skalds would have written such tales with their tongues firmly in their cheeks, but vital lessons were still to be gleaned from their telling. Children would have picked up on the notion of 'doing right' and they would have still inspired youngsters to be brave and heroic. Tales of pagan gods would have been warmly received since the Icelanders were proud of their heathen past but, unlike during the oral transmission of such sagas during olden days when the likes of Odin and Thor were treated with great respect and reverence, the Christian reader would have taken it as a lively narrative and nothing more. The Christian skalds had shifted the emphasis away from pagan factual events to entertaining parables. The best-known example of the Sagas of Antiquity, the *Völsunga saga*, consisted of stories taken from the heroic 'lays' or poems, and concern Sigurd, the Burgundians, and Jormunrekr, the Ostrogoth king.

> "This rich multicultural tapestry is ever-present in the words of the sagas"

The Sagas of the Kings, or *Heimskringla*, contain the historical biographies of the kings of Norway from prehistoric times up into the 14th century. The very early sagas were written by the Norwegians, but it was the Icelanders who took on the role of capturing the narratives of the kings for posterity. Complicated passages of poetry were often embedded into the prose, known as 'praise poems', which were passed down by word of mouth during oral transmissions dating back over 200 years. These were the written forms of those skalds who had aligned themselves with a particular king so many years before. The sagas were almost certainly intended to be used as a historical reference, educating later generations and showing them who had gone before. These were given as gifts, sometimes to the kings themselves. It is thought that the magnificently illustrated *Flateyjarbók*, incorporating the sagas of Olaf I Tryggvason, who instigated the adoption of Christianity among the Icelanders, and St Olaf, was created as a present to the young King Olaf IV when he was a child. Other popular sagas within this genre included the bizarrely titled *Fagrskinna*, meaning fine skin, and *Morkinskinna*, meaning rotten skin.

Commoners and everyday folk were recorded in such tales as the *Bandamanna saga*, reinforcing a notable difference between the epic and the saga, while the sagas of the bishops and the saints bathed in the glory of the new Christian heroes. The lives of the apostles and saints were enormously popular and read with far more reverence and respect than that afforded to the now defunct pagan gods of Odin, Freyr, Baldr and Thor. Icelanders now looked to Heaven rather than Valhalla.

The Saga of Poets dealt with the tormented love lives of the famous skalds. Their tempestuous characters and roller-coaster careers made for entertaining reading since, to the ordinary citizen at least, they appeared to be exotic creatures with awe-inspiring capabilities and skills. Just as we might read of a movie star's life today, the Vikings wished to know more of their famous skalds.

Romantic sagas, also known as the Sagas of the Knights, were translated from continental love stories and instigated by Norwegian king Haakon Haakonsson. Interest in such tales started in Norway but quickly spread to Iceland where they became quite popular, although there remained a lingering mistrust of such texts due to ancient tradition.

In the past, poems praising a woman had been banned because of potential loss of reputation and unwanted publicity, but also the fear that the words might in fact be a spell and therefore contain a possible binding effect. The Vikings believed that poems were a divine gift from Odin, the highest of the gods, and therefore held special power. Although Christian intervention had generally washed away such heathen thought, pagan principles still lingered in the form of superstition and folklore.

The earliest romantic saga was most likely the *Tristrams saga* in 1226, which was based on the legend of Tristan and Isolde. Further sagas followed, including the *Karlamagnús saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*. Eventually, the Icelanders moved beyond translating French romances and attempted

The Swords in Rock monument on the outskirts of Stavanger, Norway, commemorates the Battle of Hafrsfjord. The skalds honoured such events in their sagas

a number of their own, ultimately developing an indigenous romantic narrative.

The Contemporary Sagas, so-called because they were written shortly after the events they described, were different to the other sagas since they were not based on the oral transmissions of the early skalds but were instead recent history texts. The majority were set in 12th to 13th century Iceland and concerned Iceland's society during a particularly turbulent period where the country lost its political independence to Norway. Most of these tales are to be found in the *Sturlunga saga* and, to a lesser extent, *Arons saga*.

However, the most popular and most famous sagas of all are the Sagas of Icelanders, or 'family sagas'. These *Íslendingasögur*, as they are called in Icelandic, are the enthralling tales of the ancestors of Iceland living from the 9th to the 12th century. The stories speak of all walks of life, from the farmers to the local chieftains, and often follow their families for generation after generation. They therefore span the settlement era right up to the commonwealth period in Iceland's history. Clearly the time delay between the events and their composition has distorted the picture, particularly since many key moments have been given a Christian spin, but the family sagas are still a magnificent recollection of Viking society and Norse culture.

Early *Íslendingasögur* show the all-important Norse ideals of loyalty and heroism. Most are thought to have originated from the early oral transmissions shared by the local skald of each village, ensuring that the history of the families would remain in the hearts and heads of its people. When educated skalds, embracing Christianity and the written form, began scribing, it is thought that they took it upon themselves to commit all of these stories to vellum and therefore preserve them. Although most of the 'heroes' within the family sagas are basic farmers, some were famous at the time. The previously mentioned *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* of the the romantic sagas are also considered to be family sagas since they concerned local people. *Laxdæla saga* is a touching tragedy that is extremely unusual since it uncharacteristically appreciates the beauty surrounding the skald. The *Gísla saga*, written before the middle of the 13th century, shows enormous artistic skill and reflects the talents of its subject matter, the poet Gísli Súrsson.

> "Here, in the heart of the Viking people, the Norsemen chose to write in the language of Iceland"

As time progressed, the Sagas of Icelanders became more romantic in nature and added a magical element not seen since the Legendary Sagas. Folklore was carefully woven into the tales, mixing facts with the fantastic. The saga of Grettir the Strong, or *Grettis saga*, was riddled with fey figures and portrays the hero fighting against terrifying ghosts and monstrous trolls of Norwegian legend, a reappropriation of some of the old pagan motifs.

Without a doubt, the greatest of all the later *Íslendingasögur* is *Njáls saga*, written in 1280 but set in the 10th century against the background of Iceland's conversion to Christianity. Njál is a hero of his time; wise, thoughtful and prudent. He was also touched with the gift of prophecy which, once again, added the supernatural element missing from some of the early Christian tales. The author of this spectacular saga painted his hero with all the traditional Norse ideals of bravery, strength and unwavering loyalty, but he added modern, Christian attitudes to please readers of the day. When faced with death by burning, Njál resigns himself to his fate as any Christian martyr would, thereby unifying the old thinking of the traditional sagas with that of the new. The 'burnings in' was a common form of revenge in the Viking age and was recognised in the blood feuds. In this way, *Njáls saga* attempts to please the older generations who would appreciate the references to the past, and spark interest in the younger members of society who felt more at ease with Christian attributes. As a result, it is commonly held to be a carefully crafted literary masterpiece.

Conversion to Christianity from paganism played an important part in many Viking sagas. The most obvious is, of course, that without the introduction of writing the tales down, most, if not all, would never have survived. As it is, there are no original stories, told in oral transmission, left to enjoy. Rather, the modern reader must be content with the doctored versions, largely rejigged by Christian skalds. All the surviving manuscripts date from well after the time the stories were originally written down. There are a number of early and late manuscripts supposedly telling the same tale, but the differences are enormous. Just as fairy tales have been drastically altered in their retelling over the years, so too have the sagas.

Understandably, the Christian slant became more prominent as time went on. The legendary gods, once looked upon for guidance, became nothing more than a good yarn t. Bravery and honour were slowly replaced with piety and virtue, but the desire to battle, to conquer lands and overcome family feuds was never lost. Although sometimes tempered, the passion of the Viking people remains fiercely alive throughout the stories.

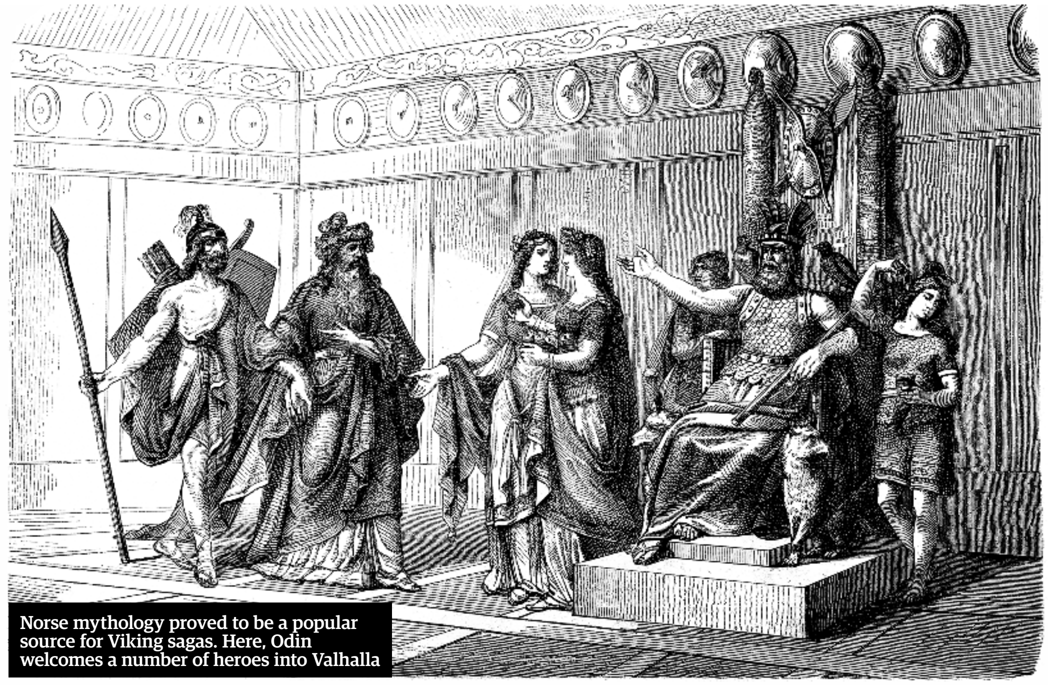
Kristni saga, an anonymous Icelandic text, assumed to have been written at some point during the 14th century, describes Iceland's conversion to Christianity. Interestingly, it discusses the process as a political one rather than a spiritual change of heart, which supports the many skalds' attempts to balance between the two religious factions. Pagan rituals, such as sacred oaths sworn over a ring and sacrifices to Thor, Freyr or Njord almost certainly continued in private, behind closed doors. Such ingrained, passionate beliefs could not be completely wiped out so easily, particularly if the reasoning behind the change was to align themselves with other nations.

Early historians accepted the sagas as accurate accounts – mythological creatures notwithstanding. It was generally presumed that the unfolding of historic battles, the founding of nations, the tumbling down of dynasties, were true, more or less. However, later academics resisted the notion that the sagas were historically accurate, and instead labelled them as nothing more than works of fiction that had been created to entertain the people.

Today, historians take a more balanced viewpoint. On the one hand, the sagas are highly romanticised. Heroes and heroines are always physically outstanding, intelligent and skilled, regardless of whether they're nobles or peasants. The likelihood of this truly being the case is remote to say the least. Supernatural events regularly occur but can be explained or understood through divine or magical intervention, pagan or Christian. Many of the kings' sagas in particular concern highly impressive individuals or intensely wicked characters that, in reality, cannot be relied upon since they have been written in the style of brazen propaganda. A Christian gloss has equally muddied the waters. As with any historical text, the work is more often than not written from the winning side's viewpoint and, in the case of many of the sagas, written sometime after the event. But before we disregard these works entirely, we need to acknowledge their importance in understanding Viking life.

Through the sagas, historians have come to understand the complexity of Norse society, its rules on divorce, law and the influence of the Alþingi (local parliament), paganism, outlawry and their custom of fostering. The importance they gave to kinship, community and family honour have all been painted in colour for us to comprehend. This was not a warring tribal nation of barbarians, but rather a thoughtful, passionate set of peoples too easily stereotyped by Hollywood.

Archaeology is proving that many of these stories are steeped in fact, and they have even been used to locate genuine Viking settlements such as the L'Anse aux Meadows site in Newfoundland. The journeys undertaken by the Great Heathen Army and later groups can all be traced onto a modern map. These people were real, their lives were real and their stories have lived on, thanks to the Viking sagas.



Norse mythology proved to be a popular source for Viking sagas. Here, Odin welcomes a number of heroes into Valhalla

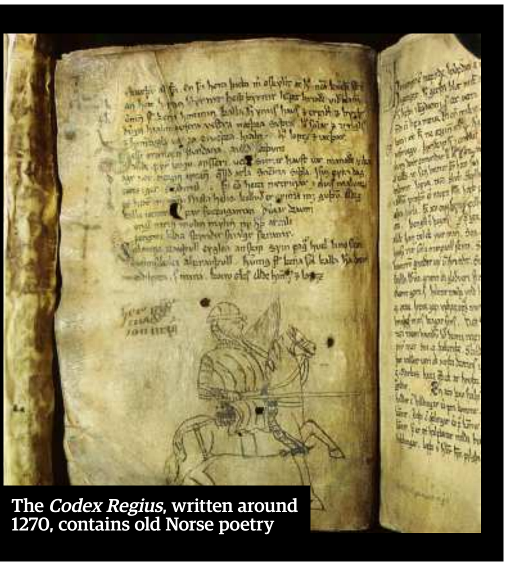
Oral court poetry of the skalds

Skaldic poetry may have originated in Norway but it was fully developed by the Icelandic poets between the 9th and the 13th century. Unlike Eddic poetry, the skalds named their work, focusing on description and adding subjectivity to the topics at hand. The metres were syllabic while the language itself was liberally sprinkled with poetic devices called 'heiti' (synonyms) and 'kennings' (metaphors). Such complex verse form was often composed as homage to a king or an admirable figure of the day and was almost certainly spoken rather than sung.

The use of kennings, such as 'wave-horse' for ship, or 'sword-liquid' for blood, were often blended with motifs from Norse mythology, which would have been general knowledge at the time but can cause great confusion today. While some are still clear – 'ring-giver' for king, for example – others, such as 'the blue land of Haki', meaning 'the sea', are lost on many new readers. Over 100 forms of skaldic poetry were used but by far the most popular verse form was the court metre or 'drottkvoett', which used syllable count, assonance, internal rhymes and alliteration.

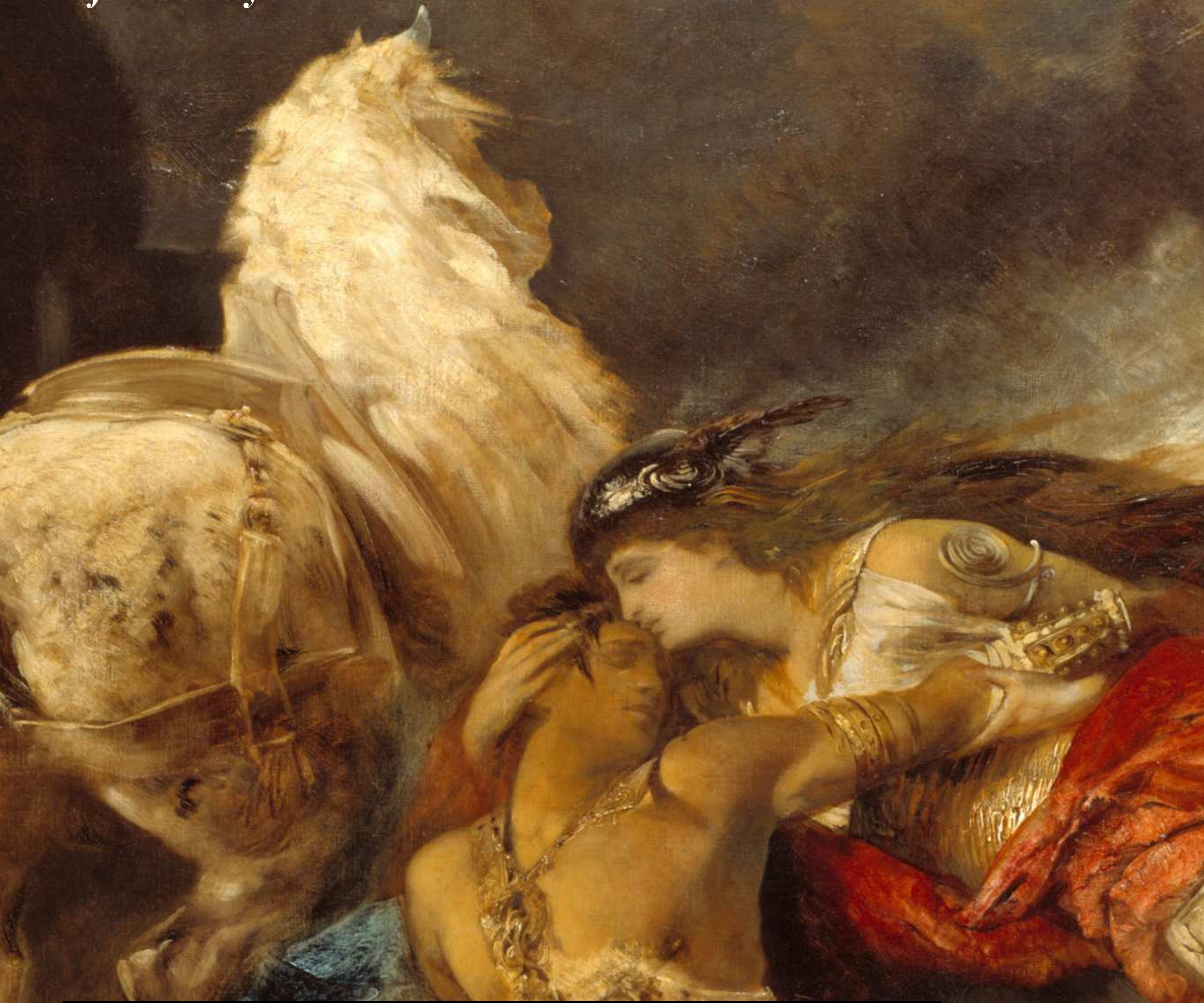
Eddic poetry, on the other hand, was nearly always anonymous. Unlike the subjective complexity of the skaldic verses, Eddic literature was simple and to the point. Three metres were used, comprising of the speech measure, the epic measure and the song measure, with no strict stanza rules. Whereas skaldic poets wrote of heroic deeds, epic battles, mythology and love, Eddic poets were inclined to write about anything, including bawdy or humorous topics. Their tone was often scathing and, sometimes, deeply insulting – and since the authorship was unknown, the author had no fear of reprisals.

The most famous Icelandic Medieval manuscript of poetic edda is known as the *Codex Regius* and comprises of a vast number of anonymous Old Norse poems. Subject matter includes many verses on mythology and Germanic heroic legends alongside the witty shorter pieces.



The *Codex Regius*, written around 1270, contains old Norse poetry

Images Getty Images



Adventuring across the entire Viking world

The stories of the Norse heroes remind us quite how much of northern Europe the loosely affiliated Viking civilisations commanded. While much of the action takes place on the continental mass that encompasses the key territories of what are now Norway, Denmark and Sweden, they also take in more southerly locations including northern England, Burgundy (a region between what are now France and Germany) and Lombardy (now in northern Italy). Meanwhile, the majority of the stories themselves were recorded in Iceland, and the stories themselves subtly change depending on their geographical origin. One particularly obvious example is in the various retellings of the *Völsunga saga*. In more traditionally Nordic territories one of its key female figures is known by the Norse name Gudrun, while in Germanic territories she is referred to as the more Saxon-sounding Kriemhild.

A valkyrie tends a dying hero, preparing to take his soul to the mystical afterlife hall of Valhalla

Viking Heroes

The heroes of legend are mythical, although their tales try to tie together ancient gods and real-life kings

Written by April Madden

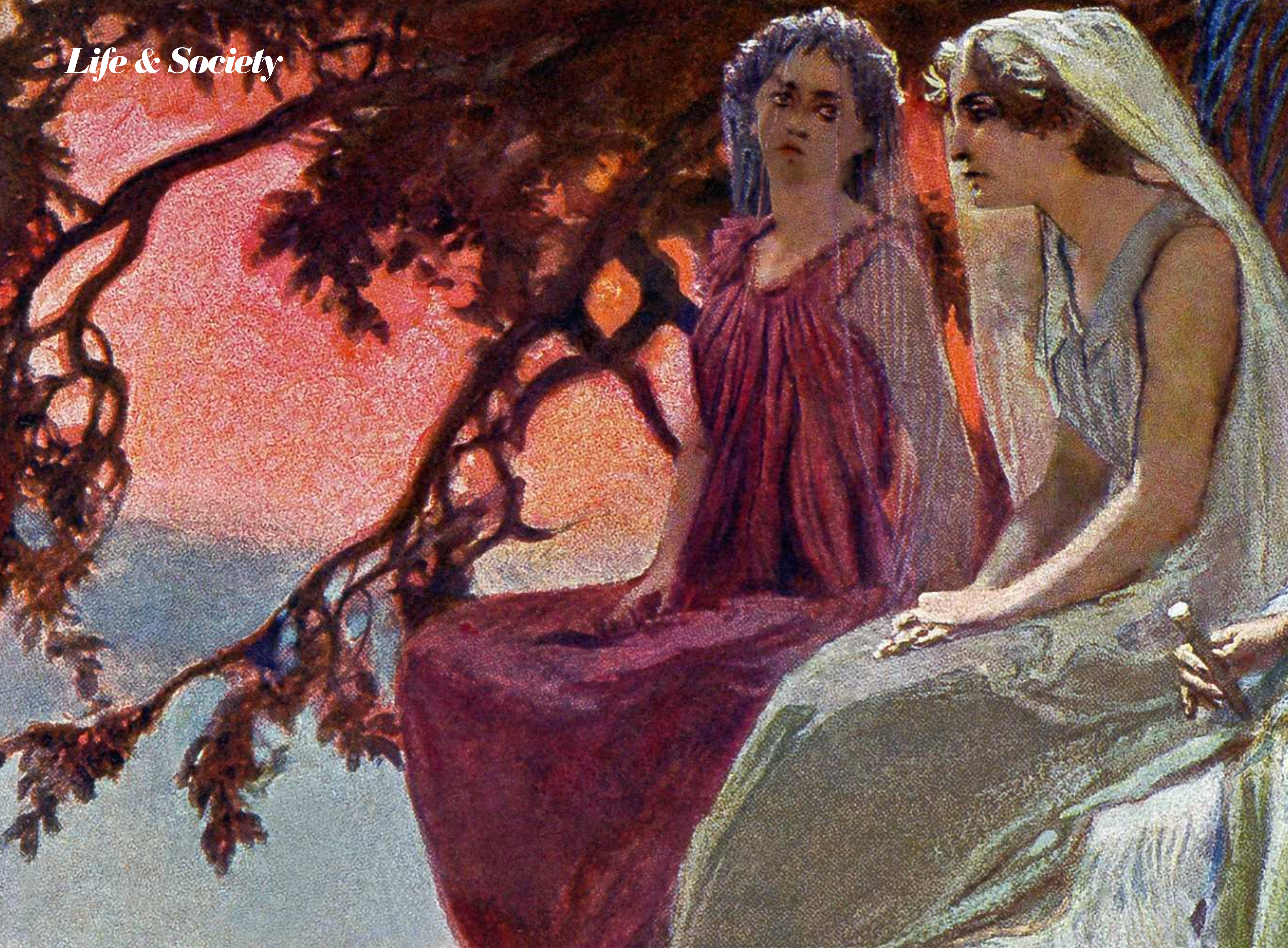
Bridging the gap between the mythical gods of the early tales and the historical kings of the later sagas are the heroes of Norse legend. Presented as genuine figures from history, their superhuman feats of combat, often against supernatural creatures, have more in common with fairy stories than fact. They are often larger-than-life archetypes, bearers of mystical swords and magical rings, yet their behaviour often has more in common with what would become the chivalrous ideals of Medieval warrior Christians than it does with the bloody pagan traditions of the northern past. Christianity was introduced to Scandinavia by both sword and subterfuge, and once it took root, it changed the shape of the sagas forever.

The now predominantly Christian authors, anxious to preserve their cultural heritage without it conflicting with their new faith, and influenced by stories the well-travelled Vikings brought back to Scandinavia, now transformed the old gods into semi-classical heroes. Odin is reimagined as a Trojan princeling: a powerful warrior and wily sorcerer. It takes a few verbal leaps of faith, including the explanation that the old term for the gods, aesir, in fact translates as 'men of Asia', but soon this new genealogy for the old gods is accepted into the stories as if it had always been the gospel truth. The great skald Snorri Sturluson even goes as far as claiming that the trickster Loki is in fact the Homeric Greek hero Odysseus, explaining that this is why the 'Trojan' aesir hate him despite his resourcefulness.

Even Odin's role as the Allfather is kept intact, though modified. The now-Trojan prince, inspired by a prophecy that tells him "his name should be exalted in the northern part of the world and glorified above the fame of all other kings", sets off for the Scandinavian homelands. In Saxland (Germany), some of his sons found the Frankish dynasty of the Völsungs. In Jutland, another son founds the Scylding dynasty, from which the kings of Denmark reputedly descend. In Sweden, yet another son becomes king, founding the Yngling dynasty. The same happens in Norway. Odin is now no longer the father of the gods, but rather an ancient Nordic Queen Victoria, the grandfather of all of the Scandinavian royal lines. It's from these legendary houses that the great heroes and heroines of Norse myth descend. Setting out on journeys to distant lands, they come face-to-face with dragons and dwarves, win and lose riddle games, fight deadly battles and acquire magical artefacts.

There's a very good reason why these tales have resonated down the centuries. When these stories were first created, it was an adventurous and wealthy people that made them. They lived in climates that encouraged long winter evenings by the fireside, but had travelled extensively and become familiar with new stories from much further afield. Worldly, often more comfortably off than their homelands suggested, and raised amid a tradition of oral storytelling, the audience for these tales of heroes demanded exciting stories of action and adventure, packed with the machinations of gods, ghosts and the natural world itself.

Images: Getty Images (main); Alamy (map)



Viking Myths

Before they became Christian, the Vikings had a rich polytheistic folk faith that featured a collection of gods

Written by April Madden

Most myths and religious stories tell their peoples' tale of the world's creation, but unusually, the early Viking myths also tell of its destruction. Before Christianity swept through the Scandinavian lands – a process that started in the 8th century – Norway, Sweden and Iceland had their own homegrown pantheon of gods, some of whom we still know from comics, films and TV.

In fact, you may be familiar with the central idea of Norse cosmology – the 'world-tree', Yggdrasil – thanks to a diagram drawn by the titular hero of Marvel's *Thor*. Yggdrasil, a mighty ash tree gnawed by the wyrm Níðhöggr at its roots and crowned by an unnamed eagle, plays host to four deer (Dáinn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr and Duraþrór) that feast on its boughs, and a squirrel named Ratatoskr, who travels up and down, sowing discord between the eagle above and the serpent beneath. The 'Nine Realms' of Norse cosmology are connected by the roots and branches of the tree, and although they are not all specifically or consistently named in the ancient sources, today's consensus tends to agree that they are comprised of Midgard (Earth, home of humans), Álfheimr (home of the elves), Niðavellir or Svartálfaheimr (home of the dwarves or alternatively the 'dark Elves'), Jötunheimr (home of the jötnar, or giants), Vanaheim (home of the Vanir, a type of god), Niflheim (one of the primordial realms, that of ice and mist), Muspelheim (the other of the primordial realms, that of fire), Hel (the realm of the dead, ruled by a queen of the same name), and Asgard, the home of the most powerful gods. The tree is tended by the Norns, three female deities who decide the fate of both humans and gods.

"The Norns are three female deities who decide the fate of both humans and gods"

The leader of the gods, the aesir, is Odin, sometimes known as the Allfather. This wise and crafty king could be represented as a hale and hearty warrior in late middle age, ruling over his hall in Asgard, or as a seemingly innocent, seemingly simple beggar with a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his brow while he wandered through Midgard, presumably to disguise the fact that he had just one eye - having plucked out the other in exchange for wisdom. This was by no means the most dramatic thing Odin had ever done in his endless quest for knowledge - he also hanged himself from Yggdrasil for nine days and nights in order to unlock the secrets of the runes, or writing.

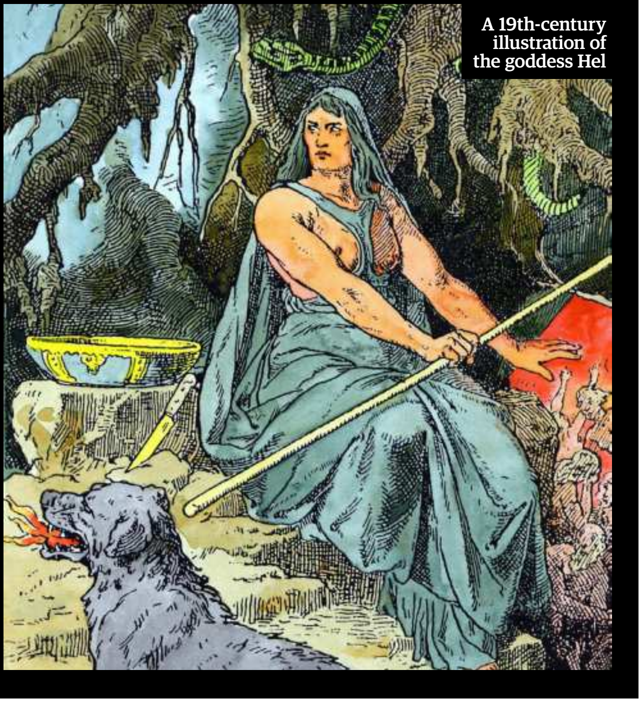
To us, the most famous of Odin's sons is Thor, a protective warrior god associated with oak trees and thunder. Yet while he was (and remains) the most popular god of the Norse pantheon, his half-brother Baldr was revered as 'the best'. Baldr was killed by the trickery of Loki, who is not an áss (a god) at all, but a jötunn, or elemental giant. And he is far from the only member of the pantheon who isn't a member of the aesir race - the goddess Skaði is of jötnar parentage too (as, in fact, is Odin), while Loki's daughter Hel, queen of the underworld, was born to the jötunn Angrboða. The twins Freyr and Freya and their father Njordr are vanir, another race of gods entirely. The Aesir-Vanir War is a myth that tells of the first ever war and its eventual resolution, which sees the two races become allies.

Most of the gods have several partners and children, some aesir, some vanir, some jötnar, with younger generations often displaying a combination of the powers possessed by their parents' races. Other less well-known members of the pantheon include Týr, the one-handed god of war, Iðunn, goddess of youth and her husband Bragi, god of poetry, Loki's horde of children (some monstrous, some not) and Ægir and Rán, the rulers of the sea. Their nine daughters, the waves, are collectively the mothers of Heimdallr, the foresighted god who watches for the beginning of Ragnarok.

Ragnarok, or 'the twilight of the gods', is the prophesied end of the world in Norse cosmology. It is a great battle in which the denizens of Muspelheim, led by their king Surtr and by Loki, war against the rest of the gods. Few of the major male names in Norse mythology are foretold to survive the conflict - only some of the children of Odin and of Thor, together with most of the goddesses (a notable exception is Sol, the sun goddess, who bears a daughter to follow in her footsteps shortly before her death), are predicted to escape the rains of fire and destruction and bring a new world into being, together with two humans, Líf and Lífþrasir, who will repopulate Midgard. Whether the cycle then begins anew, the stories do not tell us.

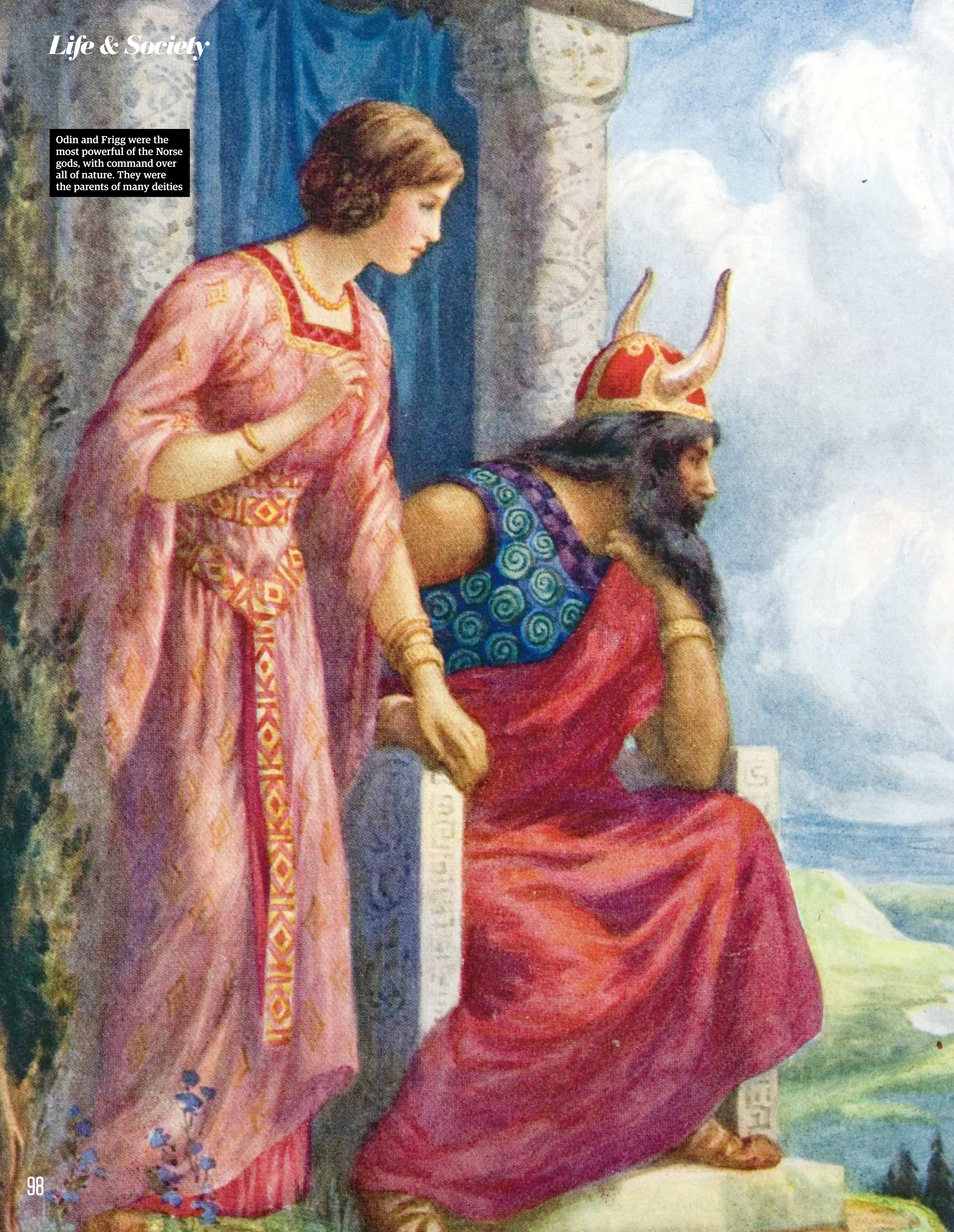
The afterlife in Norse mythology

During the Christianisation of Scandinavia, the new faith adopted the language of the old, with 'Hell' adapted from the Norse 'Hel'. Christians had previously referred to their theological place of punishment by the name of the Greek god of the Underworld, Hades, or 'Inferno', meaning fire. Yet the Norse Hel wasn't a plain of torment - far from it, according to some sources. Hel, ruled over by the goddess of the same name, was where those who had died of sickness, old age or accident went. It's often described as dreary, but some stories, especially those dealing with the death of Baldr, describe Hel decorating her hall and hosting a feast to welcome the best of Odin's sons. Warriors who died in battle, meanwhile, were shared equally by Odin and Freya; some going to the god's hall Valhalla, others to the goddess' meadow Fólkvangr, where they were feted and fed, and where they could enjoy daily battles followed by banquets for eternity.



A 19th-century illustration of the goddess Hel

Images: Alamy



Odin and Frigg were the most powerful of the Norse gods, with command over all of nature. They were the parents of many deities

Gods of the North

In icy realms beyond chilly seas, the people of the uttermost north worshipped gods that reflected the realities of their world – but how much of their theology was a later, Christian invention?

Written by April Madden

Before the worlds of the Norse were nine in number, there were just two of them: Muspelheim, the place of fire, and Niflheim, the place of cold, where the snake-haunted spring Hvergelmir rose to feed the bitter waters of the Élivágar rivers. Where the two bordered each other was Ginnungagap, the primal void. As the ice-rime winds of Niflheim met the spark-flashing breezes of Muspelheim in the soft, warm-wet centre of the void, fog brewed. Here, amid weather as mild as a Nordic dream of summer, the sleeping giant Ymir was formed:

"Of old was the age when Ymir lived;
Sea nor cool waves nor sand there were;
Earth had not been, nor heaven above,
But a yawning gap, and grass nowhere."

So says the third stanza of *Völuspá*, the great prophecy-poem in which a sorceress recounts the beginning and end of the world to the chief god, Odin. *Völuspá* forms part of the *Poetic Edda* (the anonymous, verse collection of many Norse myths), and is found in its entirety in two hand-scribed Scandinavian books of the medieval era, the Icelandic 'book of kings' *Codex Regius* and the later *Hauksbók*, a record of Icelandic history and myth set down by the scribe and lawspeaker Haukr Erlendsson. This Norse creation myth goes on to recount how Ymir sweated in his sleep; his sweat produced the first jötnar, or giants. Ymir was nourished on milk from the primeval cow Auðumbla, who licked salt from the ice of Ginnungagap. One day she revealed the form of a man, Búri. Búri had a son, Borr (it's not specified how), who married the jötunn Bestla. Together they had three children, Odin, Vili and Vé. The three god-children, the first of the Æsir gods, slayed Ymir and built the world from his corpse. The poem *Grímnismál* says:

"Out of Ymir's flesh was fashioned the earth,
And the ocean out of his blood;
Of his bones the hills, of his hair the trees,
Of his skull the heavens high."

Vili and Vé are barely mentioned again in Norse mythology – in the *Lokasenna*, the poem that tells the tale of the 'flyting', or mockery, of Loki, the eponymous god of mischief and magic taunts Odin by saying that the great god's wife slept with Vili and Vé while Odin was away on business. But Loki himself can also form another triad with Odin: in another story, three gods – Hœnir, Lóðurr (or Loki) and Odin – find two trees on the newly formed Midgard – the 'middle' world, made from

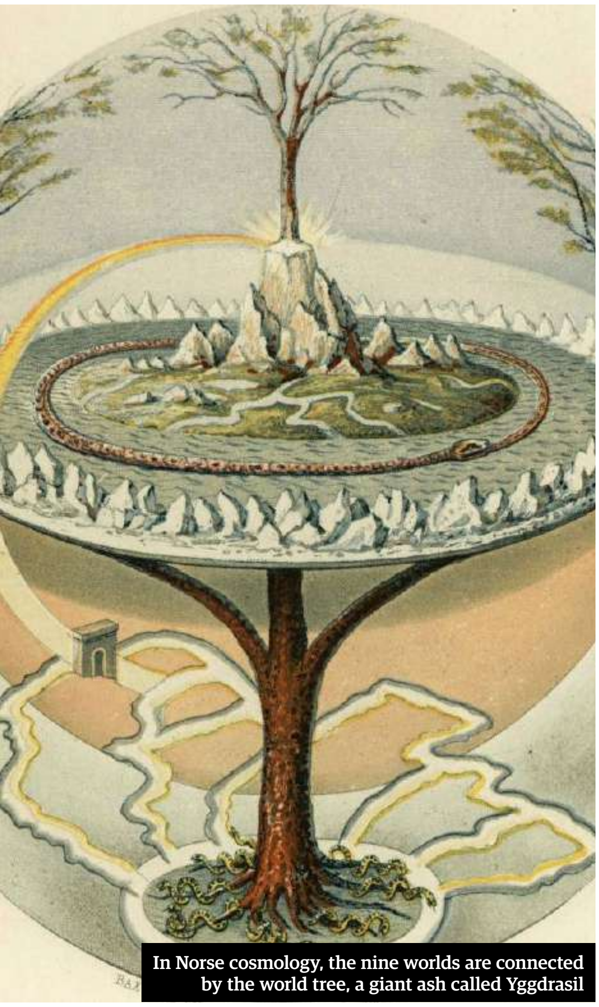
Image: Getty Images

The sacred tree

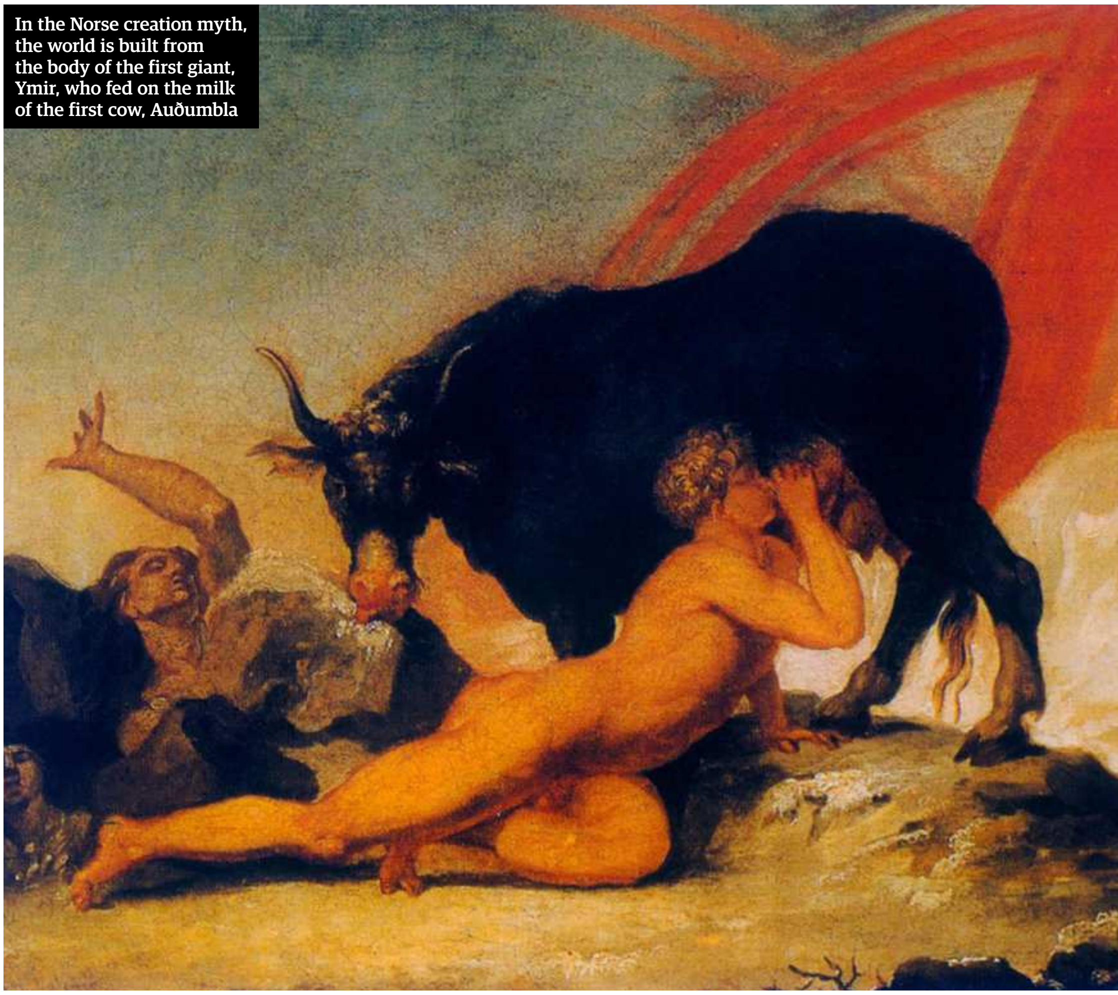
The cosmic ash tree, Yggdrasil, metaphysically connects the nine worlds of Norse cosmology: the worlds of ice and fire, of humans, elves, giants, and dwarves, of the two families of gods, and of the dead. The tree itself is populated by deer and dragons and birds; a squirrel called Ratatoskr runs up and down it, gnawing its bark and branches and sowing dissent among its highest and lowest denizens. Beneath it, the three Norns (analogous to the Fates) weave the destinies of gods and men.

The name of the tree is said to mean 'Odin's Horse', but it's not referring to his eight-legged steed Sleipnir, son of Loki. In this context, 'horse' is a back-kenning for 'gallows'. A kenning is a metaphor in Norse; a common kenning for gallows was 'horse of the hanged'; therefore the horse of Odin is the gallows he was hanged on. But why was Odin hanged? Odin was a culture hero god; he gave his people wisdom, and poetry, and finally the runes – the Norse Futhark script that was both mundane and magical. Hanging himself from Yggdrasil was how Odin acquired his knowledge of the runes:

"I know that I hung on a wind-rocked tree,
nine whole nights,
with a spear wounded, and to Odin offered,
myself to myself;
on that tree, of which no one knows
from what root it springs.
Bread no one gave me, nor a horn of drink,
downward I peered,
to runes applied myself, wailing learnt them,
then fell down thence."



In Norse cosmology, the nine worlds are connected by the world tree, a giant ash called Yggdrasil



In the Norse creation myth, the world is built from the body of the first giant, Ymir, who fed on the milk of the first cow, Auðumbla

"For centuries, Norse myth was recorded, preserved and passed on orally by the lawspeakers"

the eyebrows of Ymir – and bestow gifts on them, giving them sentience, agency, and humanity.

"Spirit they possessed not, sense they had not,
blood nor motive powers, nor goodly colour.
Spirit gave Odin, sense gave Hœnir,
blood gave Lóðurr, and goodly colour."

The two become the first humans, Ask and his wife Embla. The etymology of Embla is unknown – it may mean 'vine', or it may mean 'hard work' – but Ask is more obvious: it means 'ash tree', akin to the vast conceptual ash tree Yggdrasil that links the nine worlds of Norse cosmology.

If some of this creation myth sounds familiar, there's a reason for that. For centuries, Norse myth was recorded, preserved and passed on orally, by the lawspeakers who memorised and transmitted the laws and lore of the people, and by the völva, or sorceresses, who shamanically interpreted them. Norse myth was only written down from the 8th century CE onwards, when Christianisation began its slow sweep across Scandinavia. The men who wrote it down wanted to preserve their indigenous myth, but they also wanted to be good, modern Christians who'd put the bloody heathenry of the past behind them. In a dazzling display of homonymic freestyling, the 13th century Icelandic lawspeaker Snorri Sturluson, author of the *Prose Edda*, derives the etymology of Æsir from 'Asia' and recasts the gods of the north as refugees from the fall of Troy, as told in Homer's *Iliad*. He's following historical precedent: Rome's national epic, the *Aeneid*, written by Virgil between 29 and 19 BCE, claims Roman descent from Aeneas of Troy; Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* makes the same claim for the Britons via Aeneas' descendant Brutus, and it's likely from Geoffrey that Snorri got the idea of syncretising the gods of his forefathers with the noble but beaten classical heroes of the Trojan War. The device gave both authors (and Virgil before them) a get-out clause that gave their mythology the respectability of ancient civilisation while allowing them to elide over endemic 'old', 'rustic' and 'backward' pagan faiths. Snorri is pretty explicit about excusing his polytheistic forebears for

"It's impossible to see the myth of Baldr as untouched by Christian, or even Babylonian, theology"

assuming the 'Trojan' Æsir were gods, because of their good looks, cleverness, magical abilities, and level of civilisation.

With that little bit of Christian-classical doublethink out of the way, Snorri largely focuses on telling tales of the gods that would have been more familiar to their audience from fireside stories than they were from religious rites. Many Norse myths explain earthly phenomena that their listeners would have observed. The heat shimmer of a summer's day is explained as the tricksy Loki herding goats or sowing oats. The kink in a salmon's tail is because he once hid beneath a waterfall in that form, until thunder-god Thor caught him by the back fins and pulled him out to answer for his crimes. Earthquakes are the result of Loki shuddering with pain from the agonising punishment inflicted on him thereafter.

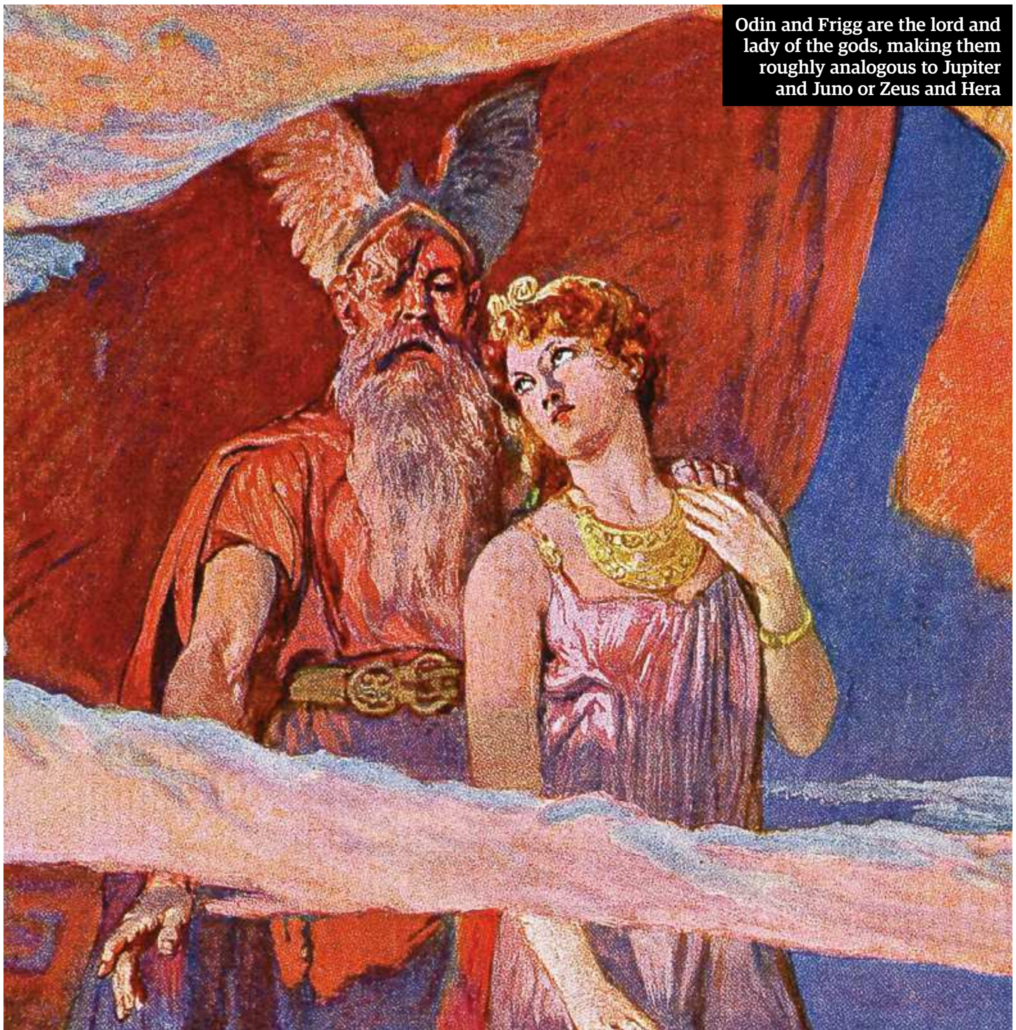
Other tales illustrate desirable personality traits, or the mechanics of the social traditions that made Norse society function. Odin, the Allfather, great god of wisdom, is often depicted as taking on the form of an elderly traveller. He frequents halls and farmsteads, pushing their human owners to break the bonds of guest-friendship and then punishing them, involving himself in riddle games that eventually reveal some home truths to his hapless human interlocutors, or, more rarely, rewarding the good with knowledge, wealth and/or power in return for their hospitality. Yet more tales explain how the gods built their halls in the holy realm of Asgard, how they interact with each other as lovers, enemies and family members, and how they fought with another pantheon in the first-ever armed conflict, the Æsir-Vanir War.

While many stories give us a glimpse into the mind of the pre-Christian Norse, many of their myths are also inflected with other ideas. It's impossible to see the myth of Baldr as untouched by Christian, or even earlier Babylonian, theology. Baldr, son of Odin and his wife Frigg, is the god of all that is good and beautiful, of sunlight and day and rulership. Loki's daughter, Hel, queen of the dead, wants him for her own. Frigg has extracted a promise from everything in the realms that it will not harm Baldr; the only thing she hasn't bothered with is the small and insignificant mistletoe. When Loki discovers the youths of Asgard playing a game of throwing all manner of objects at the protected Baldr, he gives the god's blind brother, Hodr, a dart of mistletoe. Hodr throws it true, it hits his brother, and Baldr dies. Hel agrees to return Baldr from the underworld if everything will mourn for him, but Loki transforms himself into a dry-eyed little old lady-giant named Þökk ('Thanks'), and refuses to weep:

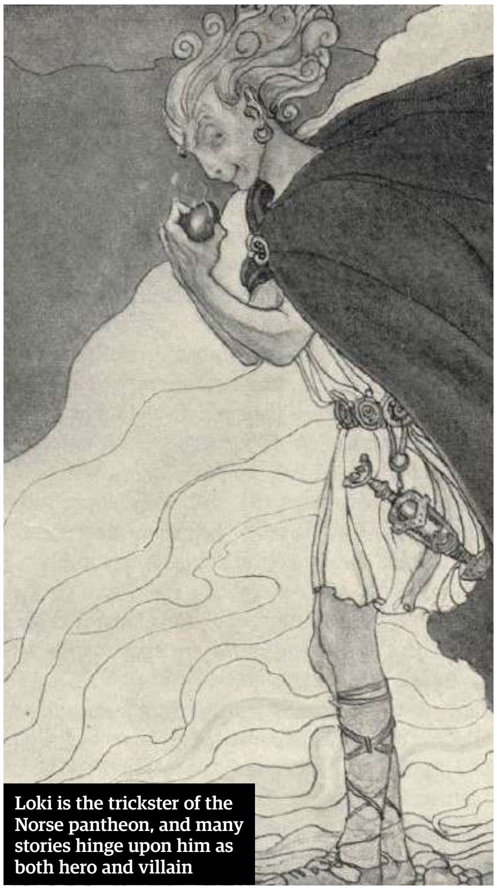
"Þökk will weep
waterless tears
For Baldr's bale-fare;
Living or dead,
I loved not the churl's son;
Let Hel hold to that she hath!"

Baldr is predicted to return from death after Ragnarök, the twilight of the gods; the world-ending apocalypse of Norse myth, after which he will usher in a bright new world order. Whatever the origins of this myth, the men who later wrote it down clearly had the biblical Book of Revelation's Second Coming of Christ in mind. But Baldr's not the only figure that would later be associated with the new god the Norse once called 'the White Christ'. One theory even suggests that the scapegrace Loki, by destroying the old gods at Ragnarök, thereby makes theological room for the 'true' salvation of Christianity, making him (metaphorically) either Christ, the evangelist John the Baptist, or one of the angels.

It's impossible to say whether the Norse as a whole really thought this, whether it was the idle theological musing of a Christian cleric, or a later analogical theory. Still, to this day, Nordic royal family trees have room at the roots for Odin, Thor, and many of the other old gods. Perhaps this is why, despite its peoples' medieval enthusiasm for Christianisation, Scandinavia managed to preserve many of the myths of its ancient deities, largely intact, for over 1,000 years.



Odin and Frigg are the lord and lady of the gods, making them roughly analogous to Jupiter and Juno or Zeus and Hera



Loki is the trickster of the Norse pantheon, and many stories hinge upon him as both hero and villain

Images: Alamy (Odin and Frigg)

THE CULT OF THOR

Revered by the Vikings, who was the god behind the superhero?

Written by Graeme Davis

Graeme Davis is a professorial research fellow at the University of Buckingham, a lecturer at the Open University and an English linguist specialising in Medieval Germanic languages and cultures.

The thunder god Thor is probably better known these days as one of the Avengers in the Marvel comic books and movies. However, more than just a superhero, he was worshipped as an actual deity by the Vikings in their pantheon.

In Viking sources, Thor is usually described as the son of Odin by the giantess Jörð, who was an earth-mother figure, her name literally meaning 'earth', similar to the Greek Gaea. While Odin was the Allfather, the king of the Norse pantheon, his unpredictability and irrationality made him a god to be feared and appeased rather than admired and imitated.

Thor, however, had a common touch that gave him a mass appeal. He was a mighty warrior who could level mountains with his

“He was a mighty warrior who could level mountains”

hammer Mjölnir, but as a weather god he also brought rain to water the crops. The many sagas featuring Thor show him exhibiting the qualities Vikings most admire, such as courage, loyalty and lust for life. In fact, it can be argued that it was Thor’s heroic efforts that hammered home Norse morality to the Vikings and taught them to admire these qualities at all.

Nordic origin story

The earliest traces of Thor go back 700 years before the Viking Age. In his book *Germania*, the 1st-century Roman historian Tacitus writes about the gods worshipped by the Germanic tribes east of the Rhine. Like many Roman writers, he equates German gods with his own: Hercules, he says, was “above all other heroes they extol in their songs when they advance to battle”. The Germans called this god Donar and he was a god of thunder, carrying a club like Hercules, which is probably why Tacitus conflated the two.

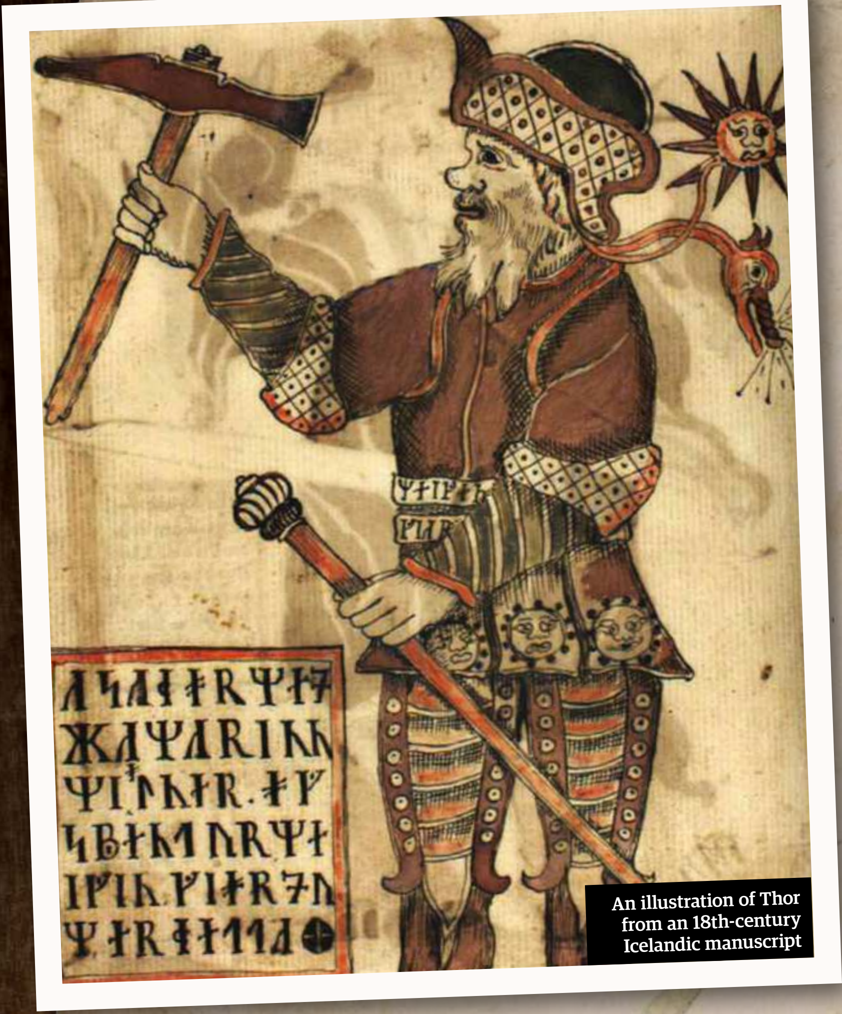
Donar’s association with thunder led to later Roman writers equating him with Jupiter, the thrower of thunderbolts. Two centuries before the first Viking raids, the Anglo-Saxons brought their pagan religion to England and among their gods was Thunor.

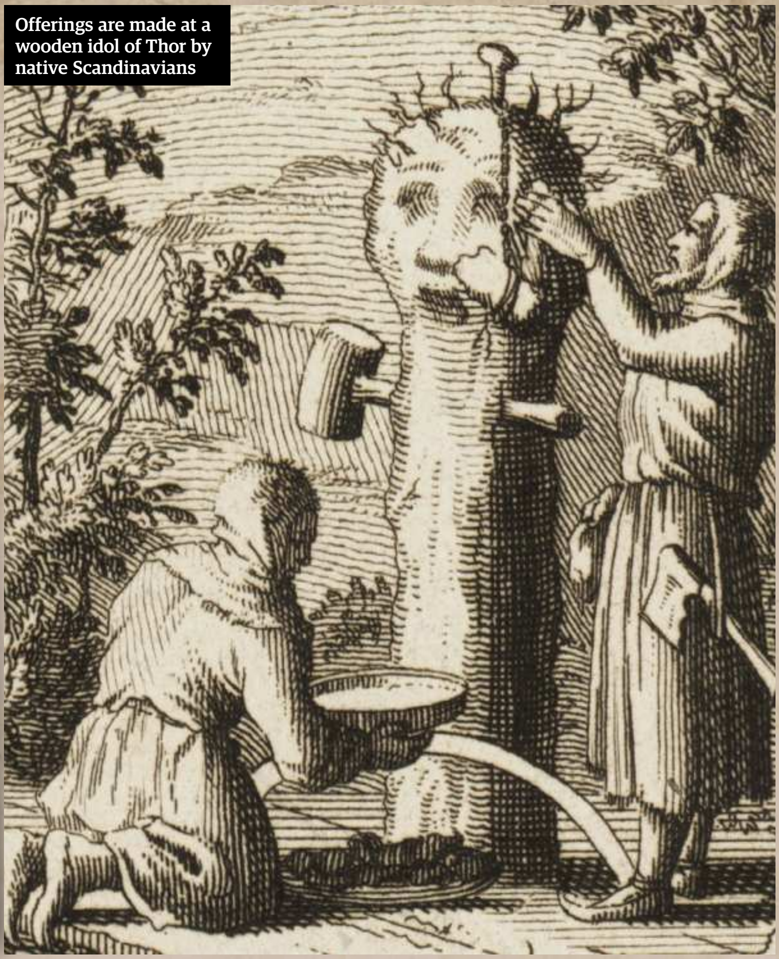
One of the main sources of surviving Norse myth is the *Prose Edda*, written by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson. However, Sturluson was a Christian and didn’t try to record these tales until the 12th century and, as such, his retellings of the pagan sagas are full of daring exploits but have been purged of pretty much all of their religious content. More than once they also begin to stray into the realm of farce.

The enchanter (and giant) Útgarða-Loki tricks Thor three times: he wrestles an old woman who is age personified and against whom no one can win; he tries to pick up Útgarða-Loki’s cat, which turns out to be the Midgard Serpent transformed; and he fails to empty Útgarða-Loki’s drinking horn because it is connected to the ocean. In another tale, Thor disguises himself as a bride to take his hammer Mjölnir back from the giant Thrym.

Other adventures are more heroic but equally lacking in any religious context. Whatever the pretext – whether it be an insult, a duel, the theft of his infamous hammer, or simply a raid into the giant lands of Jotunheim – Thor slays a huge hero before fighting his way out through

Images: Joe Cummings


An illustration of Thor from an 18th-century Icelandic manuscript


Offerings are made at a wooden idol of Thor by native Scandinavians

an army of unnamed giants and slaughtering them all.

Thor's relationships with the other gods are barely sketched in. He is married to the goddess Sif, with whom he has a daughter, and two sons by other mothers. Almost nothing is known of Sif – she may have been a fertility goddess, with her golden hair representing a bountiful harvest – and even less of Thor's offspring. Their names mean 'strength', 'strong' and 'brave' but their deeds are unrecorded. Only Loki features significantly in Thor's legends, causing trouble and being imprisoned until Ragnarök.

Worshipping the thunder god

Viking sources only tell us a little about how the Norsemen worshipped Thor, and early Christian writers – who can hardly be expected to be impartial – focus on bloodthirsty tales of human and animal sacrifice. The *Eyrbyggja saga* tells of the early colonisation of Iceland in the 10th and 11th centuries and includes a rare Norse description of a pagan temple:

"It was a mighty building. There was a door in the side wall, nearer to one end of it; inside this door stood the posts of the high-seat, and in them were nails that were called the Divine Nails. The inside was a very sacred place. Right inside, at the far end, was a chamber, the same shape as a church chancel these days. In the middle of the floor was a stand like an altar, and on this lay an arm-ring, weighing twenty ounces, and all in one piece; men swore all their oaths on this. Also on the stand was the bowl for the blood of the sacrifice, and in it the blood-twig – like a holy-water sprinkler – which was used to sprinkle the blood of sacrificed beasts. And all around the stand the gods (i.e., idols) were set out in that holy place."

The high-seat was a type of throne; in a Viking house, it belonged to the head of the household. Even more than the heart, the pillars of the high-seat seem to have been the heart of the household, and some were said to have been carved with Thor's image. In the *Landnámabók*, which also tells of the colonisation of Iceland, Thorolf Mostrarskegg threw his high-seat pillars overboard with a prayer to Thor and founded his new steading where the pillars washed ashore.

The *Flateyjarbók*, another Icelandic text, echoes the importance of the thunder god – his image sits in the place of honour between the idols of Odin and Freyr, larger than the others and adorned with gold and silver. It sits in a model of his legendary chariot, whose wheels make the sound of thunder, and the two immortal goats that pull it.

Christian writers mention Thor more often than any of the other pagan Norse gods. While

An 8th-century bronze plaque showing Thor fishing for the Midgard Serpent

> "His image sits in the place of honour between the idols of Odin and Freyr, larger than the others and adorned with gold and silver"

he is often worshiped alongside others in the pantheon - most commonly Odin and Freyr - pride of place has always belonged to the thunder god.

The most extensive description of Viking religious practices comes from the 11th-century German chronicler Adam of Bremen. In Book IV of his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, or *Deeds of the Bishops of Hamburg*, he describes a temple at the Swedish capital of Gamla Uppsala (Old Uppsala) around 1070, fairly late in the Viking Age. Once again, Thor is found sitting between Odin and Freyr in the place of honour. The temple is covered in gold and a huge golden chain runs around the roof of the building.

Outside the temple are a well into which sacrifices are thrown and a sacred grove whose trees are used to hang animal and human offerings at a festival that takes place every nine years. The sacred grove at Old Uppsala belongs to a long tradition. Tactius writes about sacred groves in his *Germania*, and Saint Olaf of Norway and King Brian Boru of Ireland, both devout Christians, destroyed groves that were sacred to pagan Norsemen.

The archaeological evidence for the worship of Thor - and for pagan Norse religious practices in general - is disappointingly scanty. Archaeologists have searched in vain for any hint of the great temple at Old Uppsala: the surrounding area is littered with burial mounds dating back as far as the Bronze Age, but no trace has been found of the building described by Adam of Bremen. Elsewhere, evidence of pagan Viking temples is maddeningly absent.

Viking socialites

The three tiers of Norse society lay at the heart of their life and culture

A person's societal standing and primary figure of worship was dictated by which tier, or 'function', they belonged to. Wealth and status varied widely within each class. An affluent farmer could own as much land as a poor jarl or he could be a tenant farmer working for a landowner with only his legal rights to set him above the thralls. Women generally held the same status as their husbands or fathers and could own land, conduct business and take legal action in their own right. Their Christian contemporaries, on the other hand, were little more than chattels belonging to their men.

JARLS

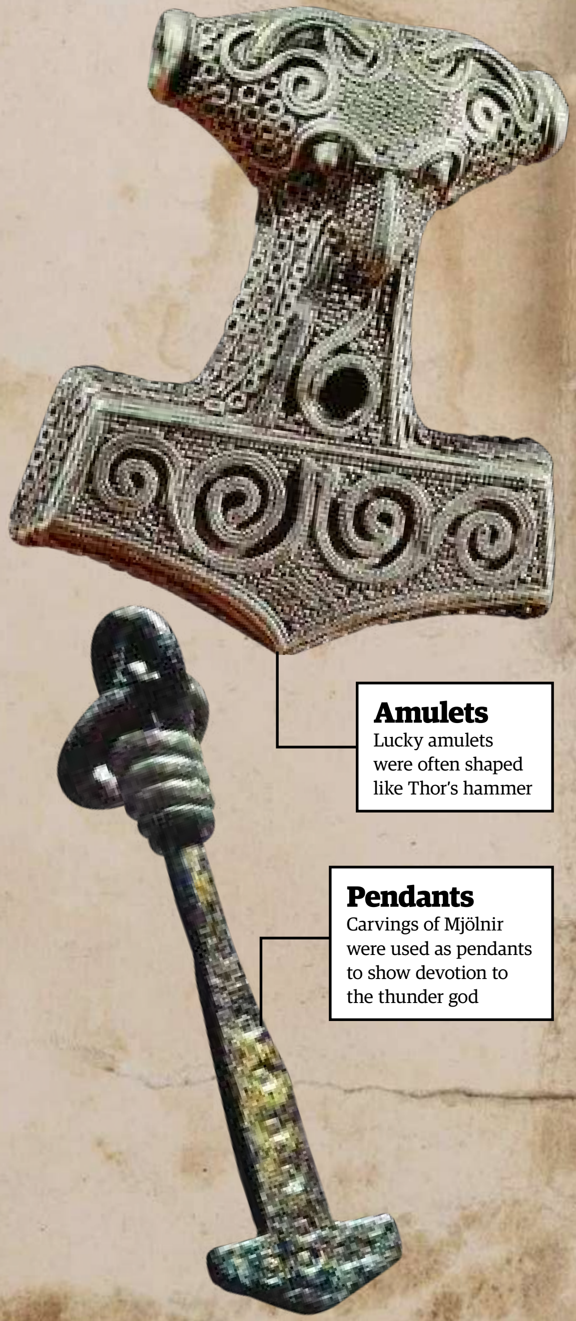
Jarls (linguistically related to the English word 'earl') formed the nobility. Kings were drawn from the jarl class, sometimes by election rather than succession - a weak or unpopular monarch could be replaced if the jarls could unite behind a rival claimant. In peacetime, they oversaw the efficient running of their lands; in war and on Viking raids, they commanded crew drawn from among the local farmers. Odin was the principle god of the upper classes and they would strive to emulate his wisdom, vast knowledge and creative spark.

NORSE MIDDLE CLASS

The Norse middle class was made up of free farmers, fishermen and craftsmen, and called bóndi or karls. In peacetime, they provided the goods and foodstuffs that kept society running; in war, they crewed the ships and made up the rank and file of Viking armies. A special subclass was the húskarls (house karls), who served a jarl or king as a personal staff and bodyguard. The gods of the middle classes had more homely and earthly values that mirrored their more physical lifestyle. As Thor was venerated for his honour and ability as a warrior, he was the obvious choice for the principle deity.

THRALLS

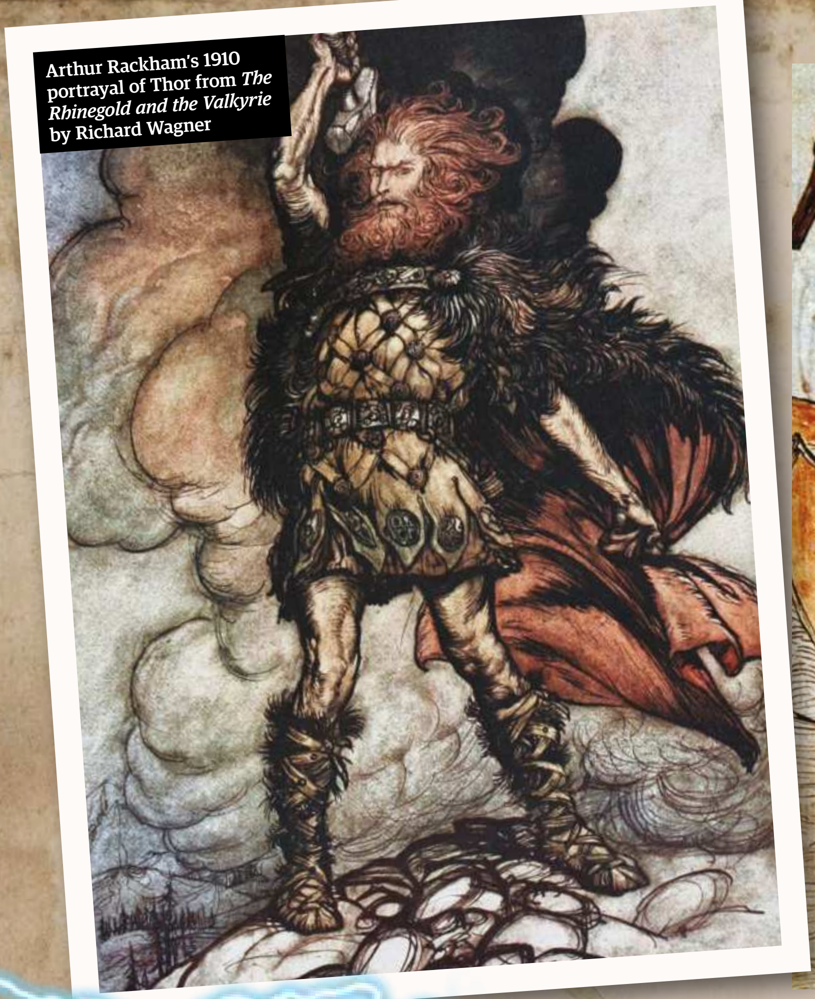
Thralls were little better than slaves. Some were convicted criminals but the majority were captives brought back from raids. Slave raids against the Slavic peoples across the Baltic were so common that the word 'sclavus' replaced the Latin 'servus' in all the slave markets of Europe. Thralls had no rights - in Viking law, killing one was destruction of property rather than homicide. The religion of a thrall could vary and would have depended on where they had originated. Viking raiders bought and sold slaves anywhere from Ireland, Scandinavia, Byzantium and the Middle East.



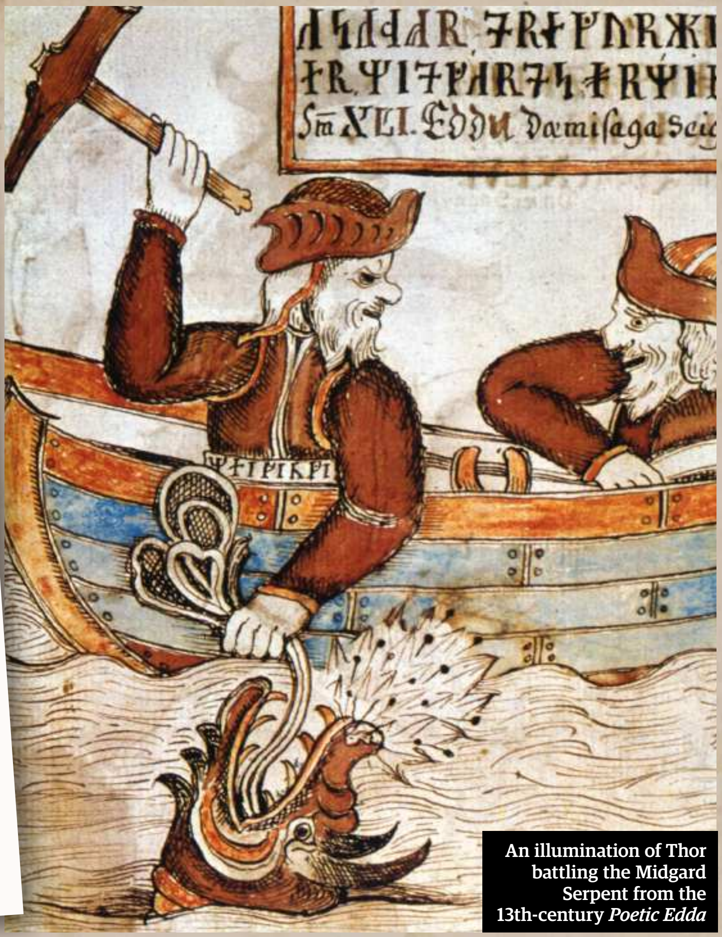
Amulets
Lucky amulets were often shaped like Thor's hammer

Pendants
Carvings of Mjölnir were used as pendants to show devotion to the thunder god

Images: Alamy, Getty Images (Amulets)



Arthur Rackham's 1910 portrayal of Thor from *The Rhinegold and the Valkyrie* by Richard Wagner



An illumination of Thor battling the Midgard Serpent from the 13th-century *Poetic Edda*

"Some historians have speculated that the Thor's-hammer pendant was developed in answer to the new faith"

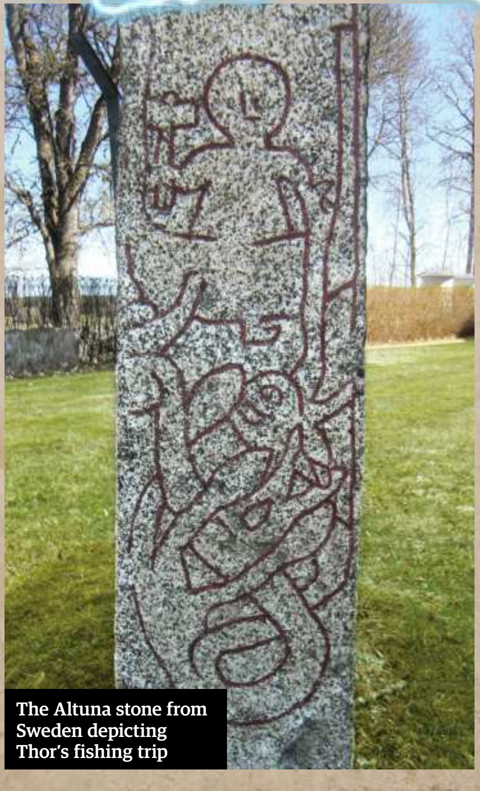
The most visible archaeological evidence of Thor's cult is the Thor's-hammer pendant but even that is less common than might be expected. Around 50 examples have been found across Scandinavia, dating from the 9th to 11th centuries, the same time that Christian cross pendants were spreading throughout Europe. Some historians have speculated that the Thor's-hammer pendant was developed in answer to the new faith.

A soapstone mould found in Denmark casts both crosses and Thor's-hammer pendants, while a silver pendant found near Fossi in Iceland can be interpreted as either – perhaps its owner was hedging his bets on which religion would come to dominate. In a similar vein, an iron Thor's-hammer from around the year 1000 was found in the Viking-ruled Danelaw of Yorkshire, bearing an inscription that begins and ends with a cross.

Several runestones call upon Thor to protect a person or an area, or simply to witness the carving of the runes and the raising of the stone. Other inscribed stones – including Christian crosses such as one from Gosforth in Cumbria – are decorated with scenes from Norse myth and images of the gods. Thor and his hammer are common motifs. On crosses, these images are often found alongside the crucifixion and other Biblical scenes.

While the archaeological evidence for the worship of Thor is disappointing, the Icelandic sagas do offer a few glimpses into Norse religious life. They tell of festivals of animal sacrifice and feasting called blóts, which mainly took place in the winter. There were various blóts, including one dedicated to Freyr and another to the benevolent goddesses known as the dísir, but there wasn't one for Thor. The thorrablót, which may have been invented in the 19th century, according to some scholars, was named after the month of Thorri (frost) in the pagan Icelandic calendar that ran from mid January to mid Feburary.

There were many names for priests – goði, gyðja, völva and seiðmaðr are known – but there seems to have been no professional priesthood. Instead, community leaders like jarls also acted as religious leaders and these terms seem to refer not to the religious rank of the individual, but to the religious activity in which they were involved.



The Altuna stone from Sweden depicting Thor's fishing trip

Asatru Norse paganism in the new age

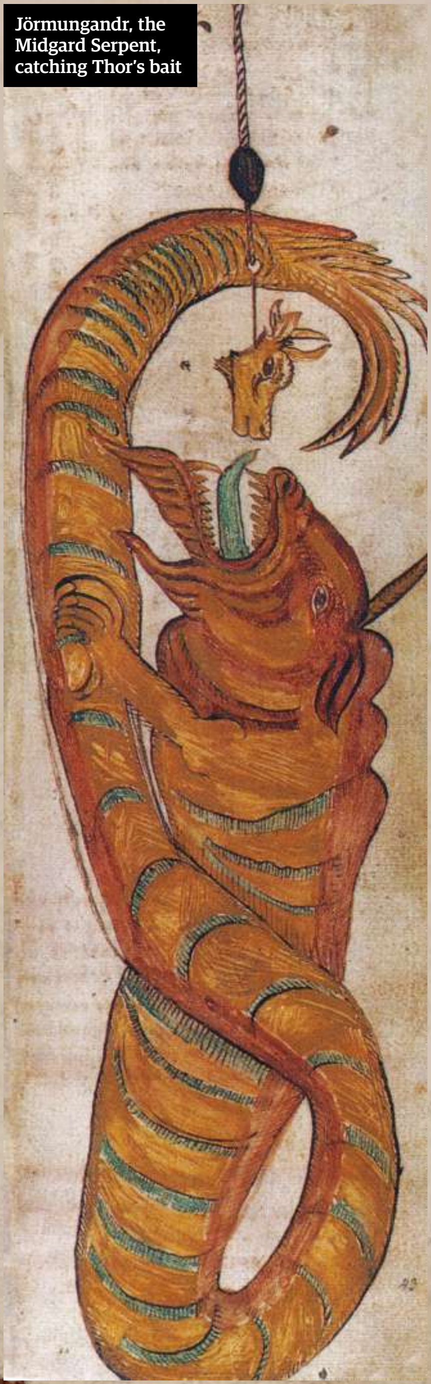
Named after the Æsir tribe of Thor and Odin, Asatru is one of several forms of Norse neo-paganism or Forn Sed (the Old Way). Vanatru reveres the Vanir tribe of Freyr and Freya, and Disitru worships the female spirits known to the Norsemen as dísir.

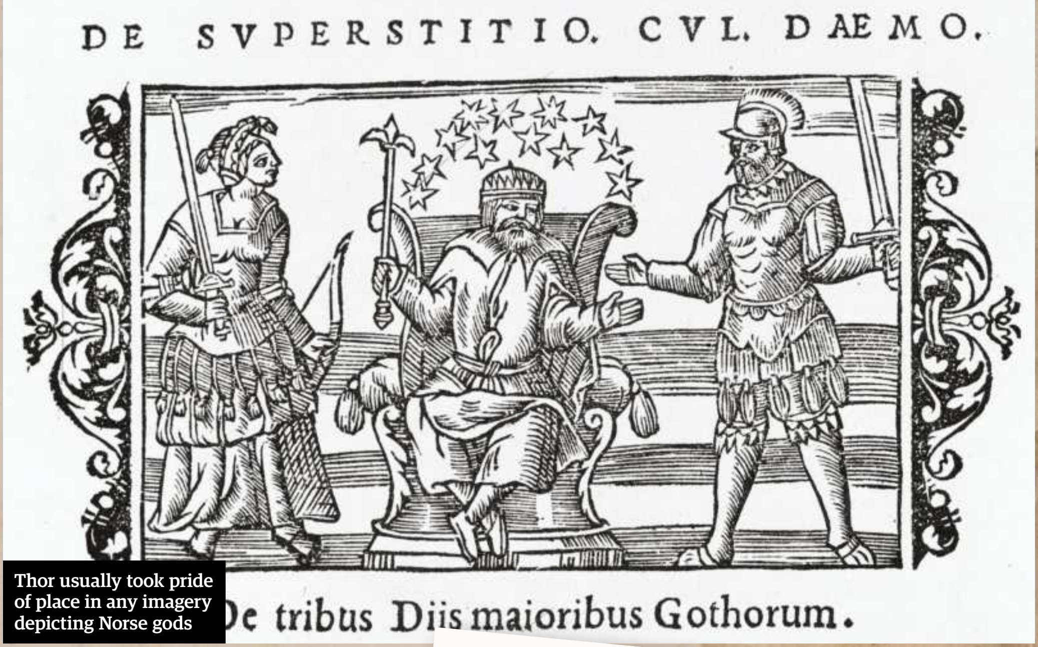
All these movements developed from the völkisch Norse and Germanic mysticism of the 19th century. They gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s when many in the West were exploring Indian, Celtic, Native American and other forms of mysticism. The Icelandic government officially recognised Asatru in 1972 and groups have grown up across Scandinavia and elsewhere.

Asatru seeks to reconstruct the pagan Norse religion, based mainly on the Eddas. Some of its followers also incorporate elements of shamanism, environmentalism, feminism and other political and philosophical elements according to their own personal values and beliefs. Some are also Wiccans. There is no established dogma and individual points of view are encouraged.

So far, the movement is small. In 2017, the Icelandic Asatru Fellowship had fewer than 4,000 registered members but it is still Iceland's largest non-Christian religious organisation. In 2015, construction began on Iceland's first pagan temple for about 1,000 years; building is expected to finish soon.

A blót taking place in Iceland in 2009


Jörmungandr, the Midgard Serpent, catching Thor's bait


DE SVPERSTITIO. CVL. DAEMO.
De tribus Diis maioribus Gothorum.
Thor usually took pride of place in any imagery depicting Norse gods

The swastika could have been a symbol for Thor's hammer

Moulds and crucibles for making both cross and Thor's-hammer pendants

Images: Alamy; Getty Images (1910 portrayal, swastika); Gunnar Creutz (Altuna stone), Lenka Kovářová (blót) CC BY-SA 3.0

The sign of Mjölnir seems to have been more than decoration. Pagan Norsemen sometimes made a gesture indicating Thor's hammer as a sign of blessing or purification in much the same way that Christians made, and still make, the sign of the cross. The story of the death of Baldr has Thor using his hammer to bless the dead god's funeral pyre, and in the semi-comic tale of Thrym's wedding, Thor recovers his stolen hammer when it is laid in his lap to consecrate the supposed bride for marriage.

The *Heimskringla* reports that Haakon the Good, an early Christian king of Norway, was bowed by pressure from his people into making winter sacrifices during a blót at Hlader. When the drinking horn was passed to him, he made the sign of the cross over it to protect himself from the heathen nature of the proceedings. Eyebrows were raised, but one of Haakon's friends defended him, saying that he was actually making the sign of the hammer, as they were all accustomed to doing.

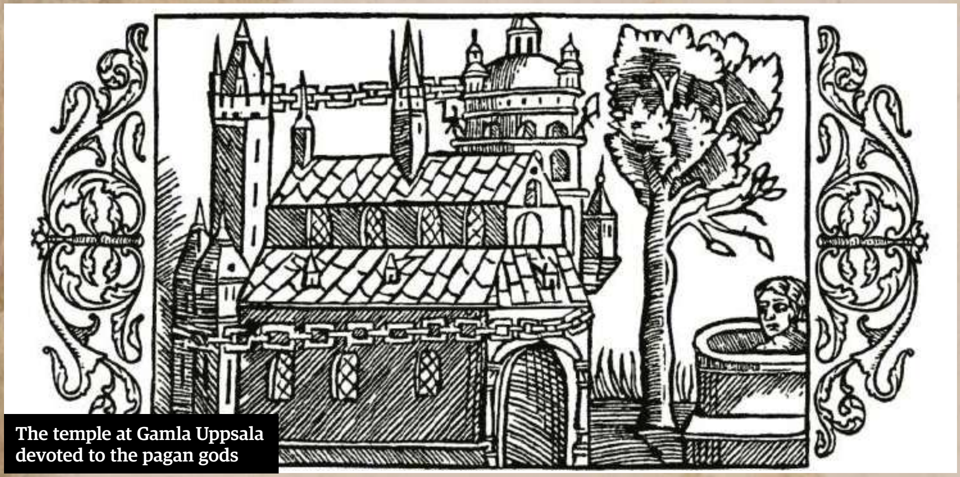
While no surviving source tells us exactly how a Norseman would make the sign of Thor's hammer, we can assume from this account that it was very similar to the sign of the cross made by devout Christians today: presumably the hand moved in a T-shape.

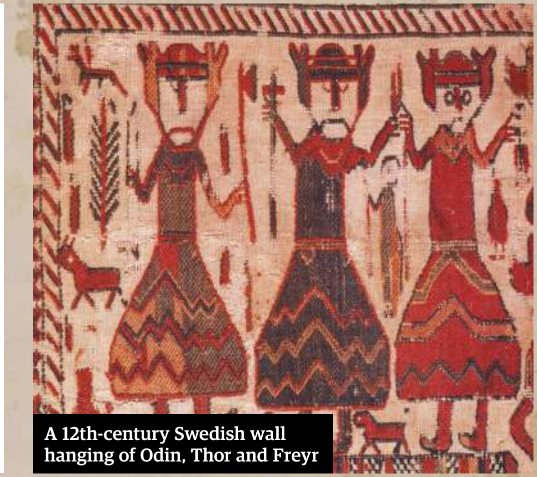
The Arabic writer Ahmad ibn Fadlan tells of Swedish Rus making offerings to idols made of "a long upright piece of wood that has a face like a man's and is surrounded by little figures, behind which are long stakes in the ground", but gives no names. Given Thor's prominence in Viking temples elsewhere, though, it seems likely that he was worshiped in this way.

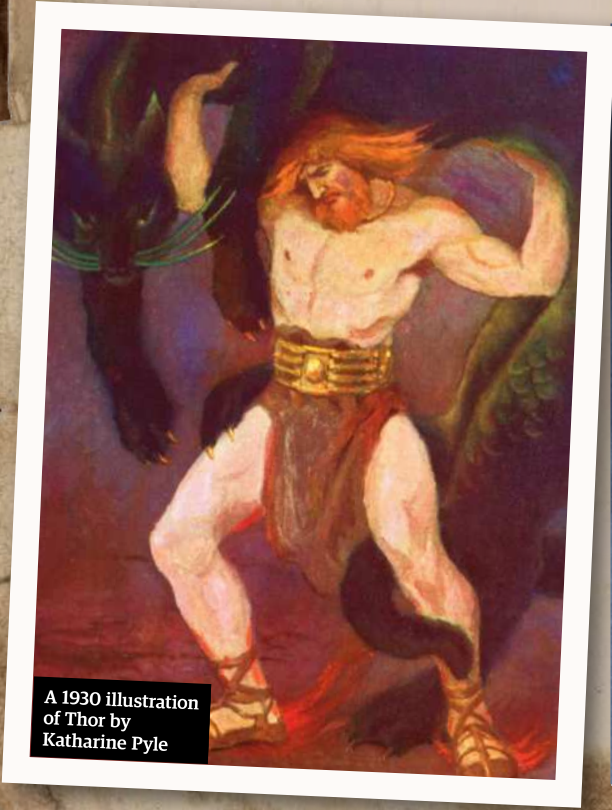
Thor also presided over oaths. In 876, Danish leaders in England sealed a peace with King Alfred the Great by swearing on 'holy rings' associated with the worship of Thor – perhaps similar to the arm-ring mentioned in the *Eyrbyggja saga* above.

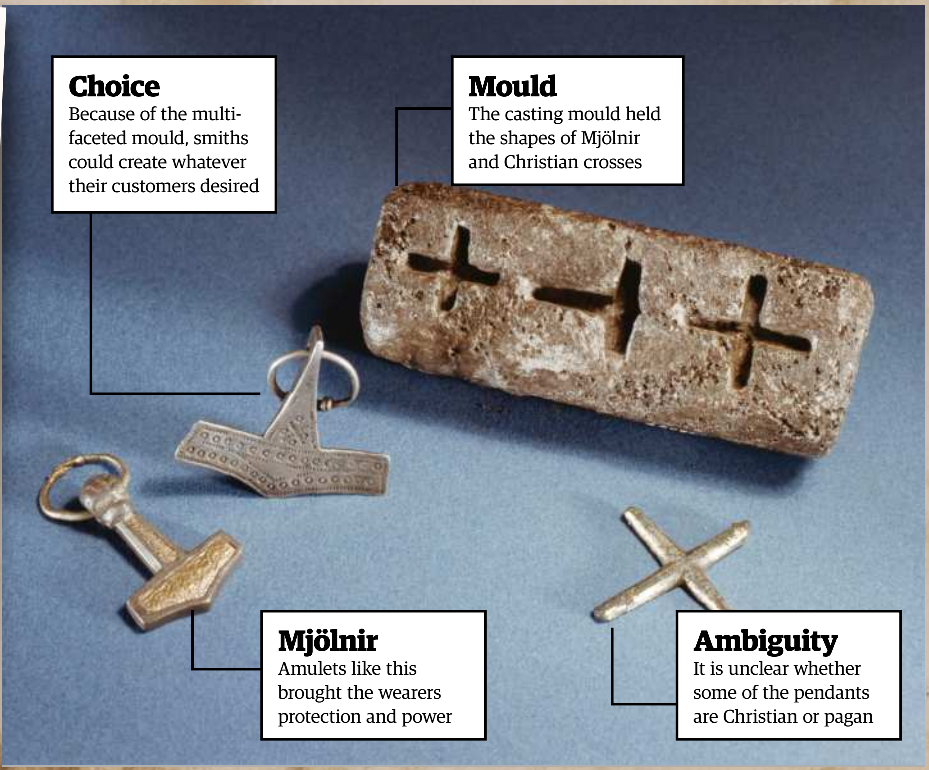
Even after the advent of Christianity, the Norsemen were careful not to offend the god who controlled the weather. A man named Gaukathori, according to the Icelandic *Landnámabók*, "was very mixed in his faith; he believed in Christ, but invoked Thor in matters of seafaring and dire necessity". Gaukathori himself is quoted as saying to King (later saint) Olaf II of Norway, "If I must believe in a god, it is no worse to believe in the White Christ than any other."

Even with Snorri's religious bowdlerising, the *Prose Edda* shows Thor as an embodiment of many qualities that are traditionally associated with the Vikings. He is a peerless warrior, a fearless traveller and quick to avenge any insult to himself or his Æsir tribe. He eats and drinks in heroic quantities and, while quick to anger,


The temple at Gamla Uppsala devoted to the pagan gods


A 12th-century Swedish wall hanging of Odin, Thor and Freyr


A 1930 illustration of Thor by Katharine Pyle


Choice
Because of the multi-faceted mould, smiths could create whatever their customers desired

Mould
The casting mould held the shapes of Mjölnir and Christian crosses

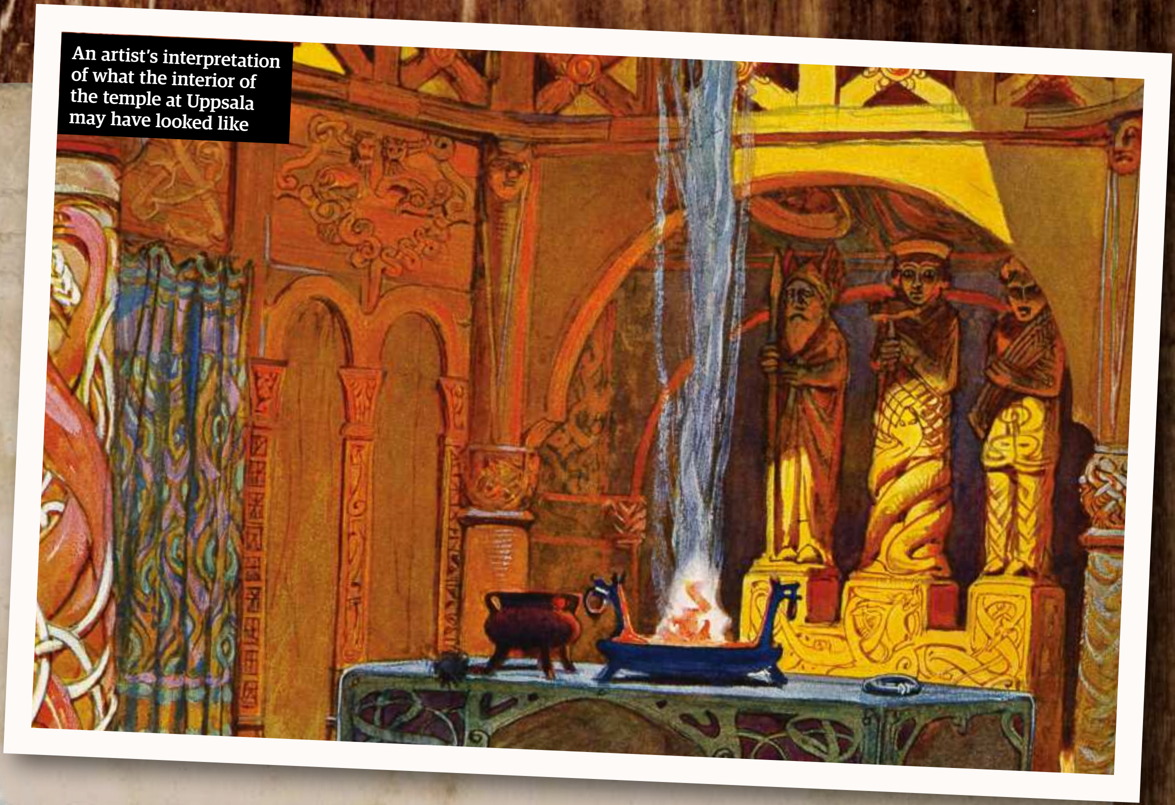
Mjölnir
Amulets like this brought the wearers protection and power

Ambiguity
It is unclear whether some of the pendants are Christian or pagan

he is never petty or envious. Most of his expeditions to Jotunheim seem motivated by the love of a good fight rather than by any racial hatred of giants.

All these qualities - strength, courage, enterprise, loyalty and simple lust for life - were greatly admired by the Vikings and historical leaders who lacked any of them often drew criticism from the saga writers.

Thor's more straightforward approach to battle, seeming to revel in the joy of fighting, would have made him more appealing to the average Norse warrior to emulate in skirmishes. The unpredictable Odin was more esoteric in his role in combat, giving berserkers their battle madness, and the *Flateyjarbók* tells of a kind of curse or spell in which a pagan king of Sweden invoked Odin to overcome his enemies in war.


An artist's interpretation of what the interior of the temple at Uppsala may have looked like

> "He is a peerless warrior, a fearless traveller and quick to avenge any insult to himself or his Æsir tribe"

A carved Viking funerary stone depicting some of the Norse pantheon

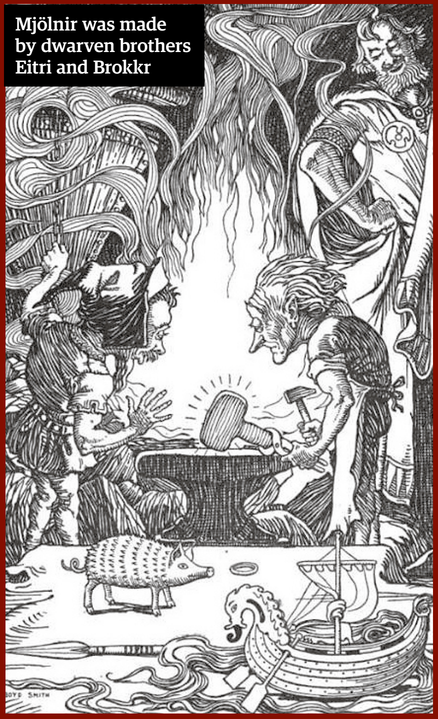
Thor's mighty hammer

The truth about the thunder god's trusty weapon

Thor used his hammer, Mjölnir, to protect the gods in Asgard from the giants as well as to watch over humankind. As a reflection of Thor, the embodiment of a storm, Mjölnir could produce thunder and lightning and also had a number of different magical properties, such as enabling Thor to fly, being able to shrink and the ability to restore life. Thor demonstrated this when he used Mjolnir to resurrect his goats after he initially killed them. Mjölnir is famed for never missing its intended target, returning to Thor's hand like a boomerang.

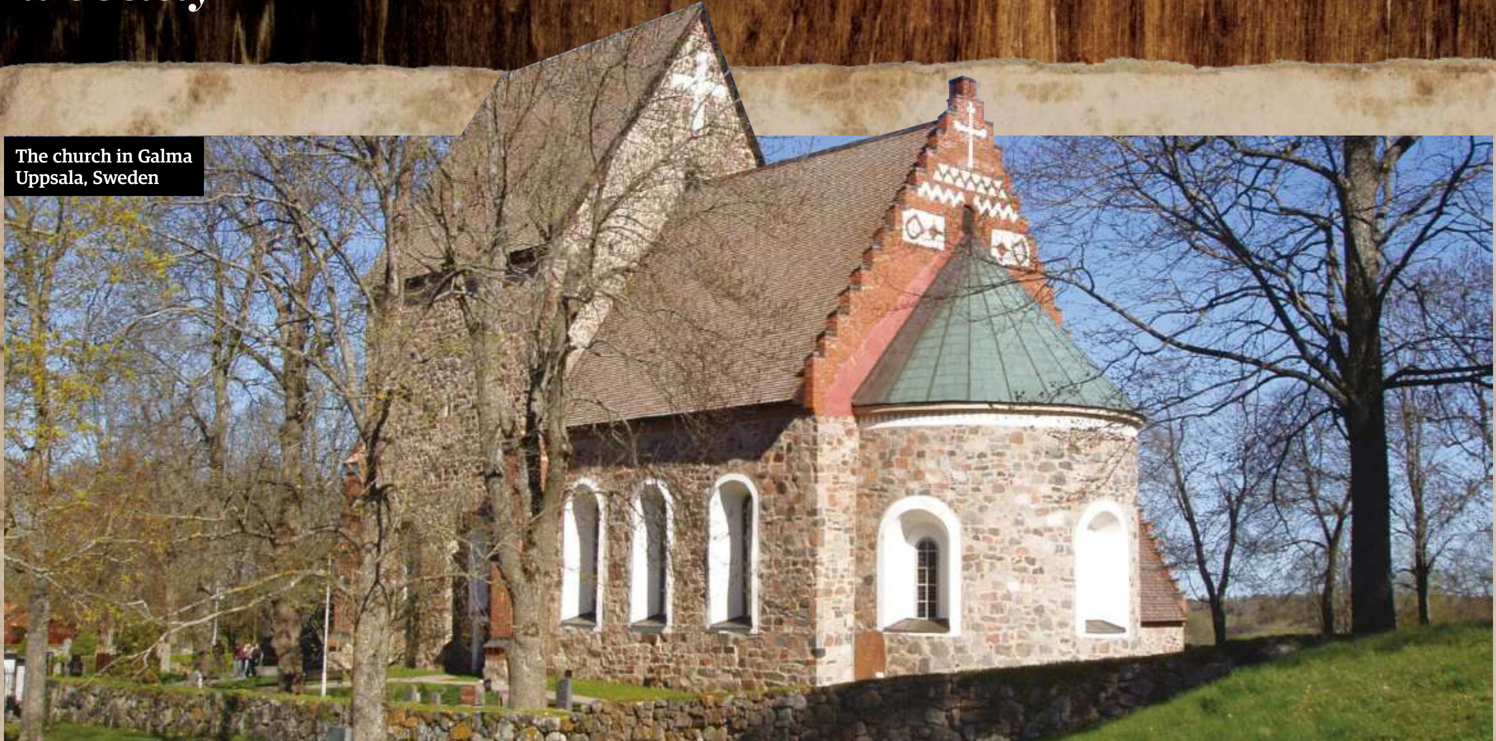
When the dwarves crafted the hammer, they mistakenly made the handle far too short. Thor wore iron gauntlets, known as járngreipr, to enable him to grip the handle firmly and a belt, megingjörð, to cope with the hammer's enormous strength, which doubled his strength and therefore made it easier for him to wield his mighty weapon.

Thor's hammer also played an important role in formal ceremonies and consecration, effectively providing protection and order in the community. Interestingly, although Thor famously wielded Mjölnir, war hammers were not used in combat until the late Medieval period, post-Viking Age.

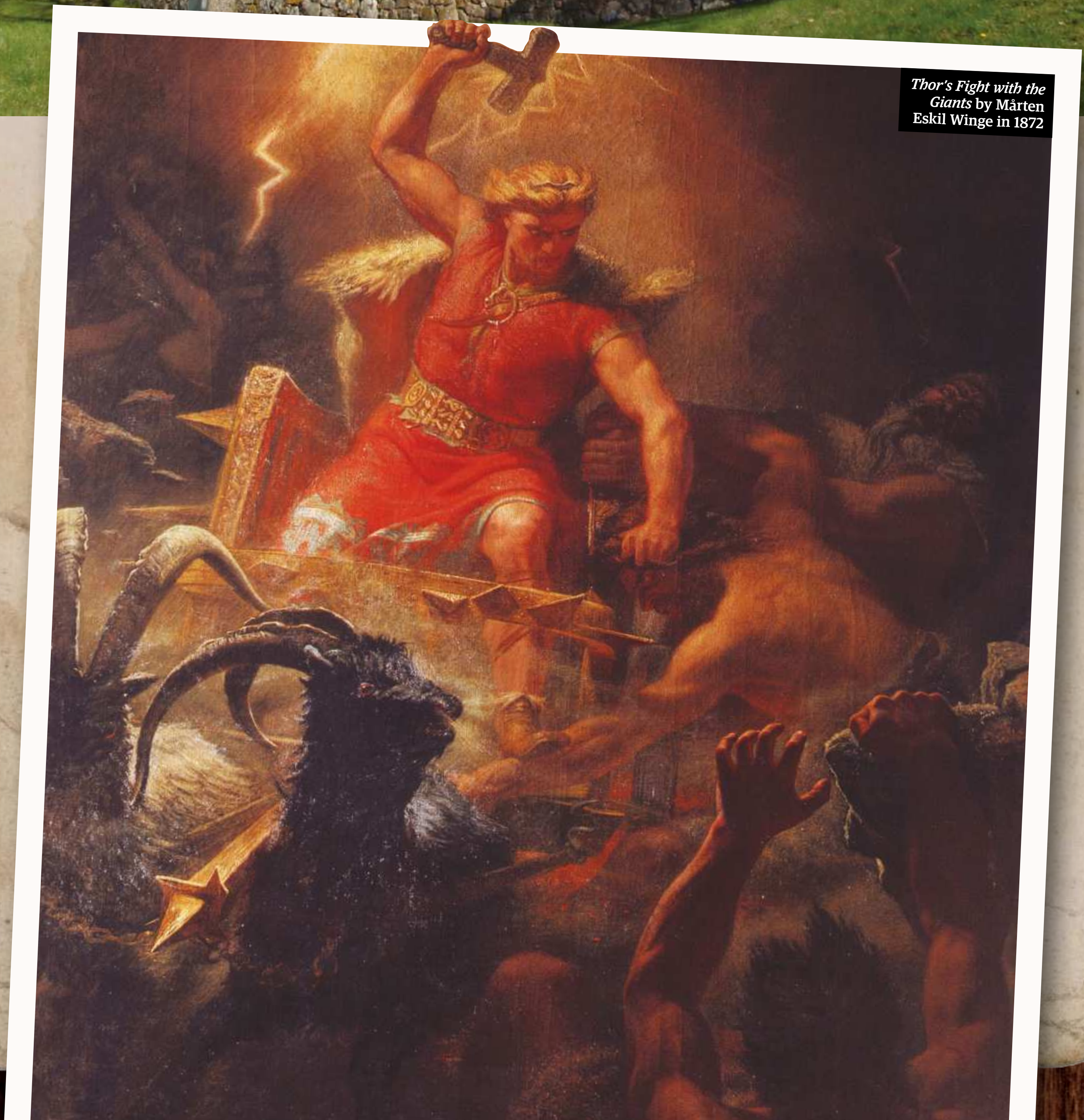


Mjölnir was made by dwarven brothers Eitri and Brokkr

Images: Alamy; Getty Images (Smiths mould, funerary stone)



The church in Galma Uppsala, Sweden



Thor's Fight with the Giants by Mårten Eskil Winge in 1872

Thor's enduring franchise

In Norse mythology, Ragnarök is a prophesised battle that will see the gods assemble to face off against their greatest enemies and (spoiler alert) they will lose. Odin will be swallowed whole by the enormous wolf Fenrir; the fire giant Sutr will defeat Freyr; Heimdallr and Loki will kill each other; and mighty Thor – though he will beat the Midgard Serpent first – will collapse dead.

While the gods fight, the earth will quake before submerging under the water, the sun will blacken and the heavens will burn. Ragnarök is essentially the Viking equivalent of the biblical apocalypse, but where the Christian end of the world is final, Ragnarök is cyclical.

The prophecy ends with the promise that the world will resurface, renewed and fertile. Two humans will repopulate the Earth and the gods will return. In comic book terms, Ragnarök is more like the elaborate crossover events that Marvel and DC run before they want to revamp their characters.

It's fitting, then, that while Thor is not the supreme deity he once was, he lives on. His name is given to the fourth day of the week, in place names like Thundersley, Thundridge and Thursley, the chemical element thorium, and in personal names like Thorolf, Torstan and Torvald, which are still used today.

Beyond the Australian actor fighting aliens on the silver screen, the legend of Thor has also been revived and retold down the years. As well as the Christian Snorri Sturluson erasing the religious aspect from Thor's sagas, the Old English work *Solomon ad Saturn* goes further, even recruiting him to the side of Christianity.

In its pages, Thor – under his Anglo-Saxon name of Thunor – strikes the Devil with a fiery axe, much as he slew giants with his hammer. Thor and the rest of the Norse sagas have also been reinvented by literary greats including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Rudyard Kipling, JRR Tolkein and Neil Gaiman.

Beyond literature, Swiss painter Henry Fuseli reimagines the deity by putting oils on canvas for his Neoclassical nude *Thor Battering the Midgard Serpent* from 1790. The Swedish historical painter Mårten Eskil Winge took a more literal approach in *Thor's Fight with the Giants* in 1872, in which the thunder god rides on a chariot pulled by goats. He also appears in 19th-century composer Richard Wagner's epic *Ring Cycle*.

Of course, in 1962, Thor was resurrected once more by comic book writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby. But while Marvel keeps on churning out pages and making blockbuster movies, it seems that the thunder god has a bigger franchise than any of the other Avengers and will outlast them all.

> "The legend of Thor has also been revived and retold down the years"

A bronze Viking Thor's-hammer amulet from 10th-century Iceland

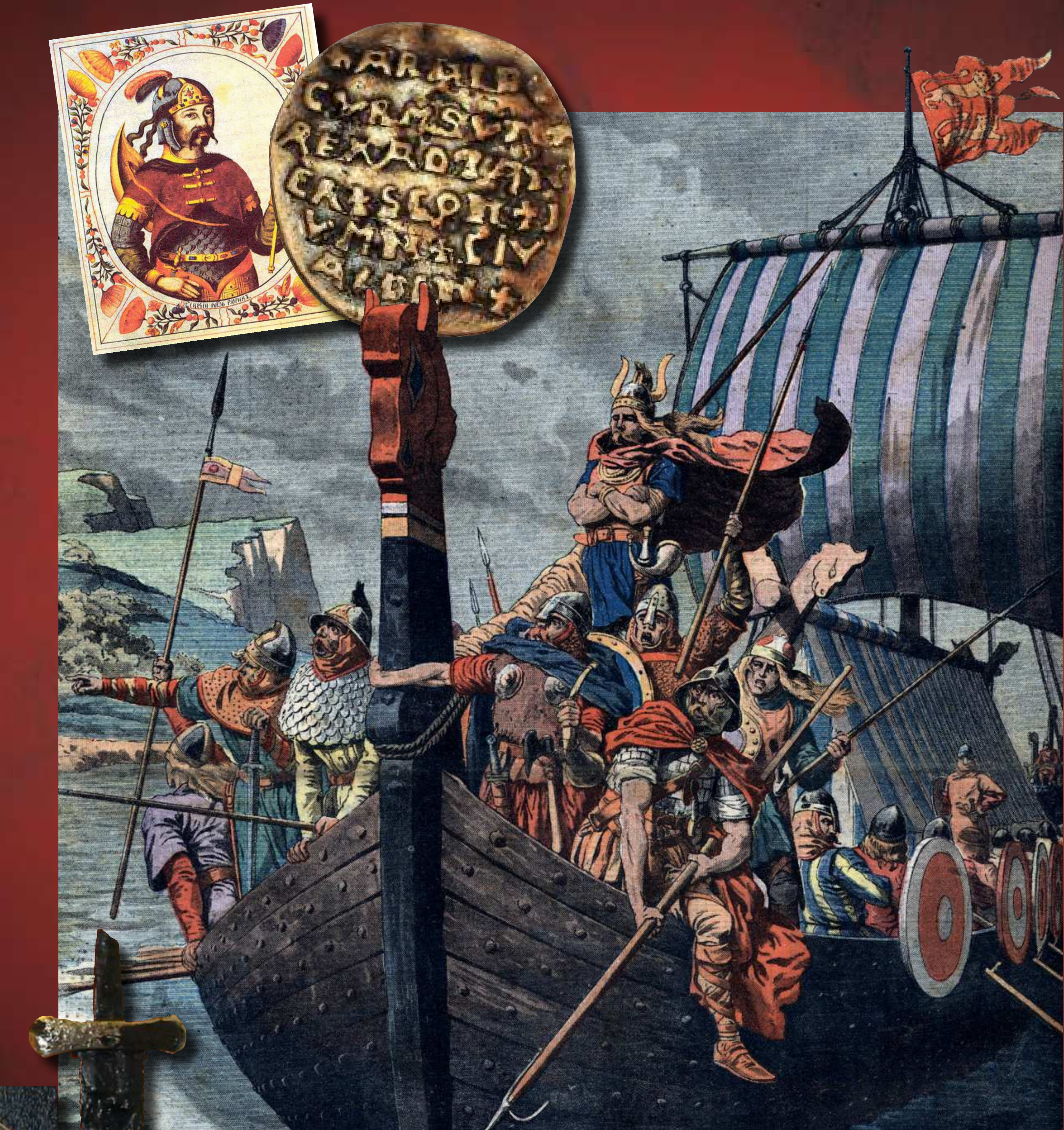
Chris Hemsworth portrays Stan Lee's version of Thor on the silver screen. This incarnation is based on the christiansed depiction of Thor as a superhero

Keepsakes
Thor holds his hammer, Mjölnir, in this 6.7cm-high statuette

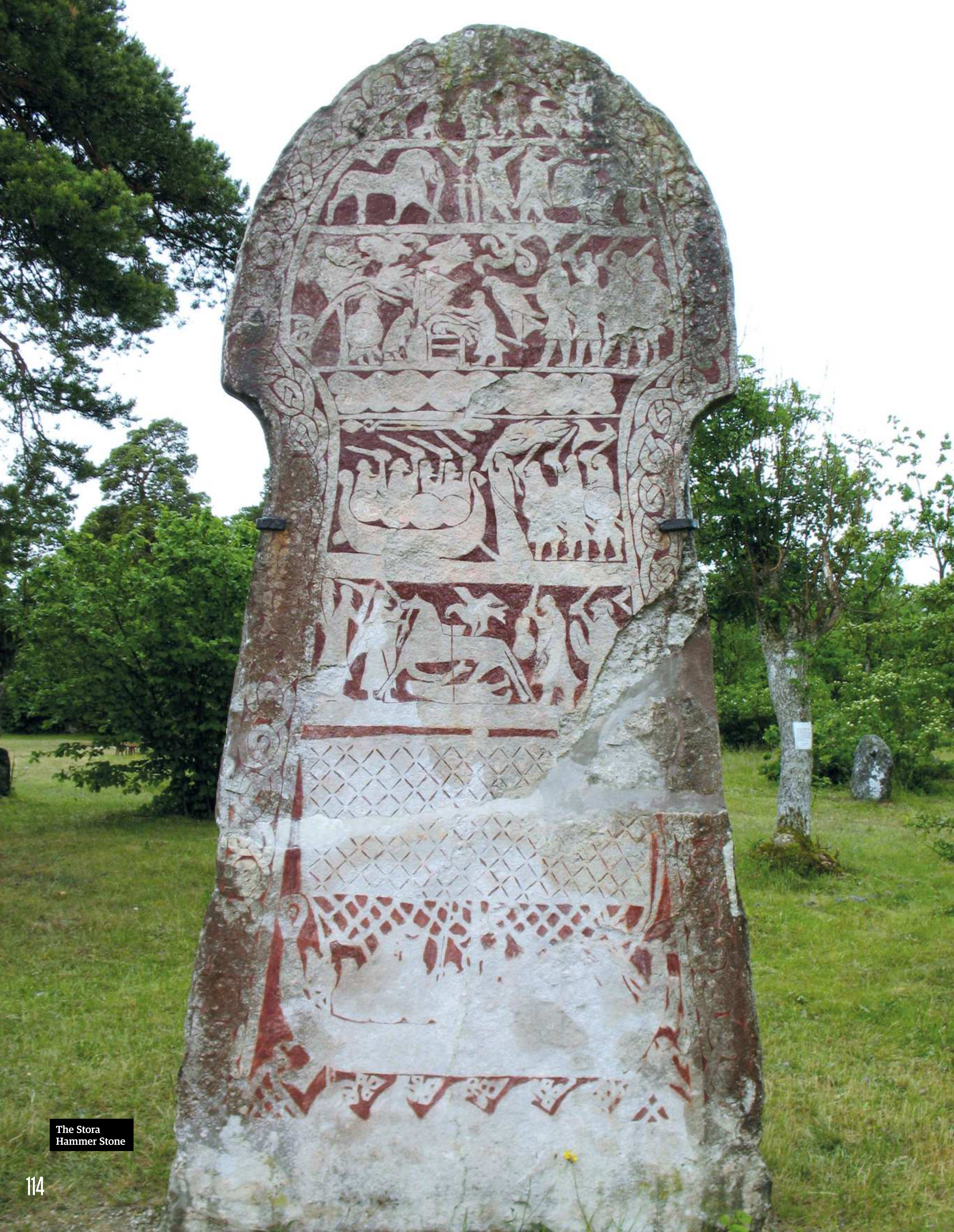
Images: Alamy; Getty Images (bronze amulet); Lestat Jan Mehlich CC BY-SA 3.0 (Galma church)

Their Legacy

114 A Scandinavian legacy
118 21 Things That Will Surprise You About the Vikings
124 Remembering the Vikings



Images: Getty Images (vikings on ship, ships); Berig (drinking horns), viciarg (swords), Tomasz Sielski (Curmsun Disc) CC BY-SA 3.0; Alamy (p124); NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet CC BY 2.0 (helmet), Sören Hallgren/Statens historiska museum CC BY 2.5 (Buddha statue)



The Stora Hammer Stone

A Scandinavian Legacy

Uncover what the Vikings left behind in the far north

Written by Benjamin Hudson

What is the legacy of the Viking Age? The answer is found in rocks, books, weapons and everyday language. Physical objects from the Viking Age are found throughout Scandinavia as well as the far-flung colonies. The Viking Diaspora was extensive and places now considered outside of Scandinavia, such as the Isle of Man, Dublin or Newfoundland, were part of it both culturally and politically.

Physical remains can be substantial. In addition to the Thing mounds, there are the rune and picture stones. They range in date from the 6th century to the end of the Viking Age, and the runic inscriptions have various stories to tell: triumphs in far-off lands; remembrance of a parent; or homage to a loved one who perished while adventuring. There is the monument raised by Ámundi and Auðgerðr in memory of their son Nundr, while history and homage mingle on the Grinda Runestone at Södermanland (Sweden) that notes, “Grjótgarðr [and] Einriði, the sons made [this memorial] in memory of [their] able father. Guðvér was in the west; [there he] divided payment in England; and manfully attacked townships in Saxony.”

The Memorial Stone for Ǫnundr

A particularly important cluster of picture stones is on the Island of Götland, off the coast of mainland Sweden. The ‘Stor Hammer Stone’, for example, has battle scenes that accurately, if schematically, show a raiding party in action. The images on these stones help researchers identify the objects found in excavations.

There are also mythological scenes, such as the Tjängvide Stone that shows Odin riding his eight-legged horse Sleipnir to the great hall of Valhalla, where heroes will carouse until the day when they must join the great army at Ragnarök, the end of the world.

The literal image provided by the picture stones complements the literary description found in the great sagas concerned with the Viking Age. All of them survive in manuscripts written after the events they describe, but the mixture of feats of daring with insights into human nature speak to people across the ages. How much they are history and how much imagination continues to be debated by scholars.

Some are pure fiction, such as *Hrafknel’s saga*, where the antihero Hrafknel starts a vicious feud when he kills a servant who had ridden the

Images: Berig (Stora) CC BY-SA 3.0; Uwezi (Ǫnundr) CC BY-SA 4.0

A replica of the Godstad ship at Chicago in 1893

“The discovery of two well-preserved ships show innovation in construction”

sacred stallion Freyfaxi. Sometimes the saga is a mix of fiction and fact, such as the masterpiece of Old Icelandic literature *Njáls saga*, in which the Christian Icelander Njáll tries to prevent violence and is burned alive in his own house. The vengeance that follows extends from Iceland to Norway to the Orkney Islands before ending in Ireland at the Battle of Clontarf, where King Sitriuc of Dublin faced the Irish high-king Brian Boru. There is scant evidence for Njáll, but we do know that the battle was real and one of the pivotal conflicts in the island’s history.

Finally, there are the sagas that are mainly history, such as the one of Magnus ‘Barefoot’, who so desired to be a Viking that he led raids on Ireland and Britain. Magnus is generally regarded as the last of the Vikings, although his actions were less random raids than they were undertaken in the interests of statecraft. His death in battle in Ireland in 1103 is considered by some to be the end of the Viking era.

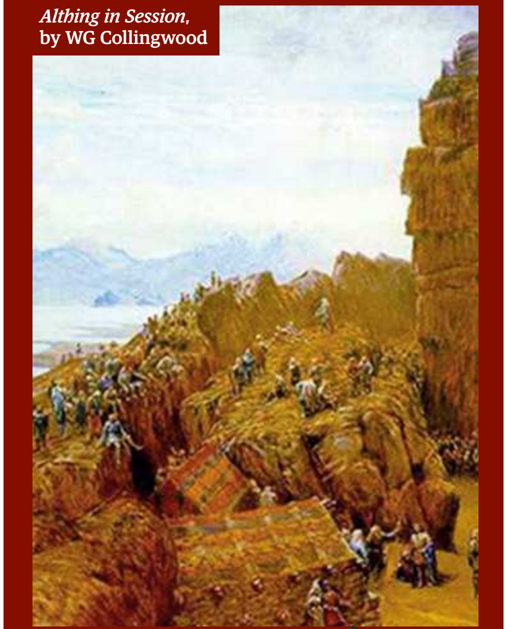
The Vikings spoke, and the sagas were written in, Old Norse, which is closely aligned with Modern Icelandic; the other Scandinavian languages count it as an ancestor. Other languages were also influenced, such as Modern English. The most frequently employed are the days of the week, which remember Thor (Thursday), Tyr (Tuesday), Oðin (Wednesday) and Friday (Freyr’s day). Gardens began as Old Norse garðr, or enclosure, and many nautical terms owe their beginning to the Vikings, such as ‘ship’, from Old Norse ‘skip’. Names of people and places also have traces of Old Norse. The Vikings used patronymics (i.e. ‘son of’ or ‘daughter of’) to identify themselves, a practice still maintained in Iceland. So names such as Olafsson or Johnsson reflect that practice. An example of Viking settlement comes from place names such as those ending in -by, for example, Kirby (Lancashire) means ‘church settlement’.

Remembrance of the Vikings’ prowess on the seas is tied with the Viking ships that were impressive in their own day, but the preservation of them in ship burials gives physical proof of their remarkable construction. The discovery of two well-preserved ships in Norway - today called the Oseberg and Gokstad ships - shows innovation in construction. A replica of the famous Gokstad ship was sailed across the Atlantic to North America for the World’s Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893. Time trials on replicas of these vessels have shown that with ideal conditions they could maintain an average speed of 14 knots.

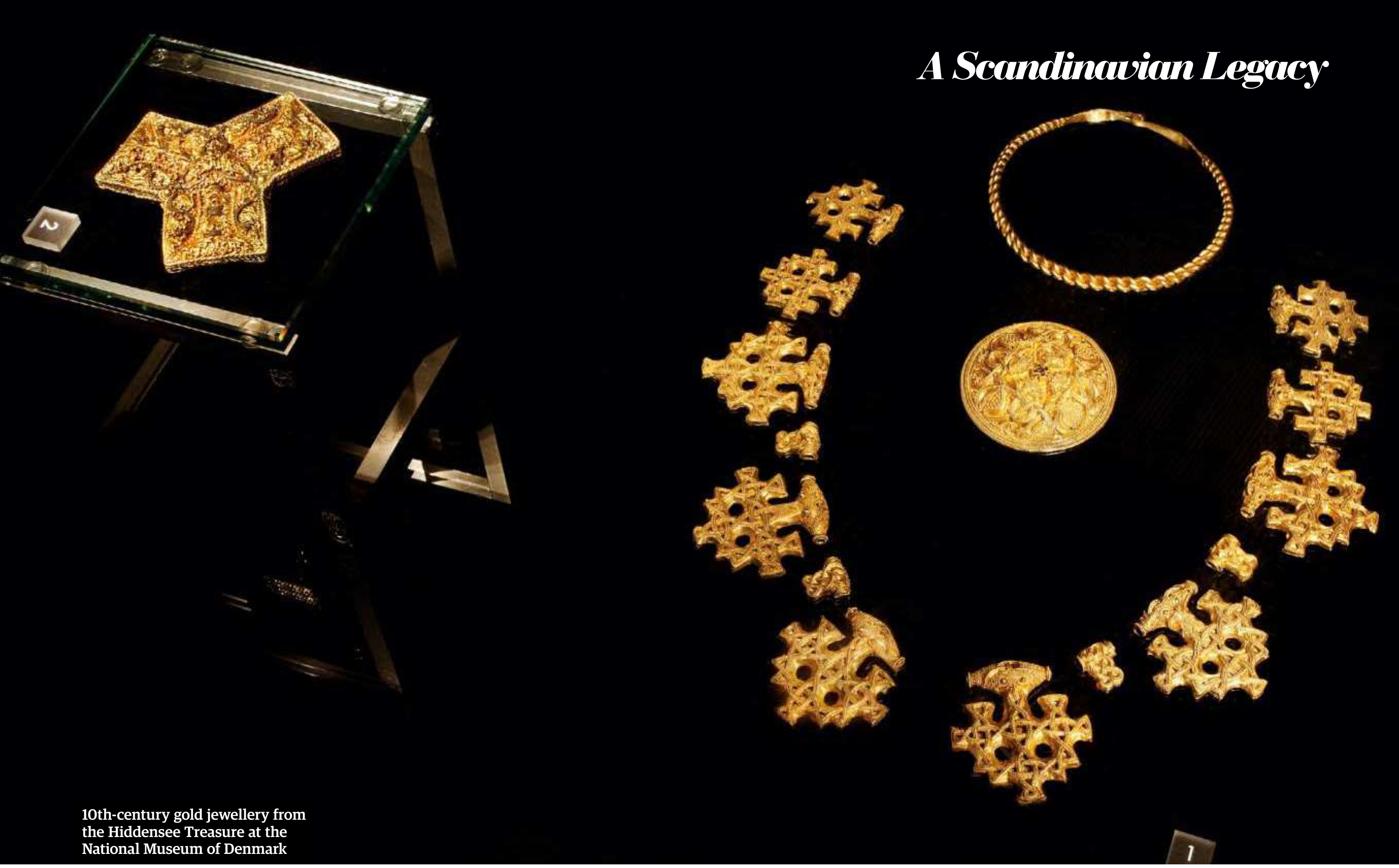
Thing mounds

The thing was the legislative assembly of the Scandinavian world. There were different types of things. Some were local assemblies, such as the local things on the island of Gotland, which came together in the landsting that represented the entire isle. Some were much larger, such as the three major things in Sweden: the thing of all Swedes, the thing of all Gears, and the Lionga thing. Finally, there was the national assembly of Iceland, the Althing, which continues to the present day (with a hiatus in the 19th century) as the Icelandic legislature. Because these gatherings’ deliberations were oral rather than written, an eminence was needed in order to allow people to hear. So sites were chosen that allowed room for a crowd, above which was a high place for a speaker.

There is the suggestion that legislation was not the sole activity round the Thing mounds, and the tentative identification of thing sites in Greenland at Brattahlið and Garðar suggest that they might have witnessed trade and social events. One thing mound that remains in active use is outside of Scandinavia, although for a long time it was a part of it. This is Tynwald on the Isle of Man, where new laws are proclaimed on Tynwald Day (24 June).


Althing in Session, by WG Collingwood

Remains of Viking Age swords, with reproduction hilts, from Denmark at the National Museum of Denmark


10th-century gold jewellery from the Hiddensee Treasure at the National Museum of Denmark

In addition to ships there are other physical objects. Prior to their conversion to Christianity, Vikings put weapons and jewellery in graves. Swords were prized and expensive, and the recovered ones show how their manufacture developed over centuries.

Today, reproductions of weapons command premium prices. Similarly, jewellery reflects both men and women's pride in their appearance. Rings, beads and torcs (neck and arm bracelets), have been recovered from inhumations and ship burials. Designs on rings and bracelets changed over time, and this provides a means of placing them in a chronological sequence beginning with the Vendel Era style of the early 9th century and ending with the Urnes Style of the late 11th and early 12th century. Jewellers produce modern pieces that are inspired by the Vikings' items. This has brought ancient works – such as pendants or torcs – to a new audience.

There are replications of the Viking lifestyle. Viking house construction is used in the manufacture of the farmstead at Hobro (Denmark). There are also reconstructions of great halls, such as the one at Trelleborg Viking Hall (Denmark). Excavations at Viking settlements have produced evidence of domesticity that seems surprisingly modern. Viking children at the eastern settlements of Novgorod, for example, played with toys that reflected their world, such as toy swords, animals and dolls, items which can be found in any modern toy shop.

Even food reflects the Viking way of life. Long voyages required stores of portable, processed food. Some of it is now served as luxury comestibles in restaurants as traditional Scandinavian cuisine.

Less tangible, but nonetheless important, was law. Even though the manuscripts containing the earliest legal codes were written after the Viking Age, they preserve the legislation showing the guiding aspects of equality and self-determination. The Icelandic code called 'Grey Goose' (Grágás) preserves much of the intent of the Viking Age, including internationalism. A provision on inheritance states that an estate cannot be settled until the heirs, be they as far south as the former Viking port of Dublin, are informed and allowed to put forward their claims. The laws were recited at the Things, where communities came together for legislation and arbitration; the name is still incorporated in some modern legislatures, such as the Iceland parliament, or Alþingi.

Perhaps the longest continuing legislative assembly in the world is the High Court of Tynwald, or Parliament of the Isle of Man, which claims to have a 1,000-year history. The name comes from Old Norse Þingvollr ('assembly field'). There are two chambers – the House of Keyes and the Legislative Council – that meet jointly on Saint John's Day (5 July) at the Tynwald Hill in St John's. So while the days of the adventurous seafarers, be they considered pirates or pioneers, may be long past, they have not been forgotten.

The Vikings are often remembered in modern culture, whether it is in classic films such as *The Viking* or through the medium of the comic strip and graphic novel, such as Marvel's *Thor*. Today, children play with figures such as 'Thor' and gift shops sell miniature hammers designed to resemble his Mjölnir.

This detail from the Tjängvide Stone shows Odin riding Sleipnir

The Vikings are used as a model for social conduct, and one can view programmes such as *The Viking Code* or attend classes on living like a Viking. Modern ceremonies reflecting Viking heritage take place outside Scandinavia. The Shetland festival of Up Helly Aa, held at the end of January, features participants dressing as Vikings (after a fashion) and carrying a replica Viking longship through the streets of Shetland towns, at the end of which the torches are thrown into the vessel in a ceremonial boat burning. On the Isle of Man there is the ceremony attending the opening of the Manx assembly at the Tynmound.

Companies of roving seamen influenced events in their own day and afterwards. Where the name 'Viking' struck terror among coastal peoples of the Middle Ages, today aspects of the Vikings are remembered in a variety of contexts, from reproduction weapons to charity events.

Images: Nationalmuseet - The National Museum of Denmark (jewellery) CC BY-SA 2.0, Viciarg (swords) CC BY-SA 3.0

21 Things that will surprise you about the VIKINGS

We often view the Vikings through the lens of centuries of stereotyping, but these lesser-known facts may astonish you...

Written by April Madden

This Buddha figurine from northern India was found on the island of Helgö in Sweden

1 THEY WERE FAMILIAR WITH WORLD RELIGIONS

The Vikings travelled extensively and were aware of far more than their own native pagan religion and the Christianity that eventually came to replace it. Textile archaeologist Annika Larsson of Uppsala University in Sweden has studied cloth unearthed from burials in Sweden that has been found to have the word 'Allah' woven into it - it's unclear whether the wearers were Muslim converts themselves or had merely imported cloth from Arabic regions. Meanwhile, on the island of Helgö, a Buddha figurine was found cached along with religious items from Ireland and Egypt. Were those who kept them simply fascinated by the foreign objects, or had they adopted faiths from their travels abroad?

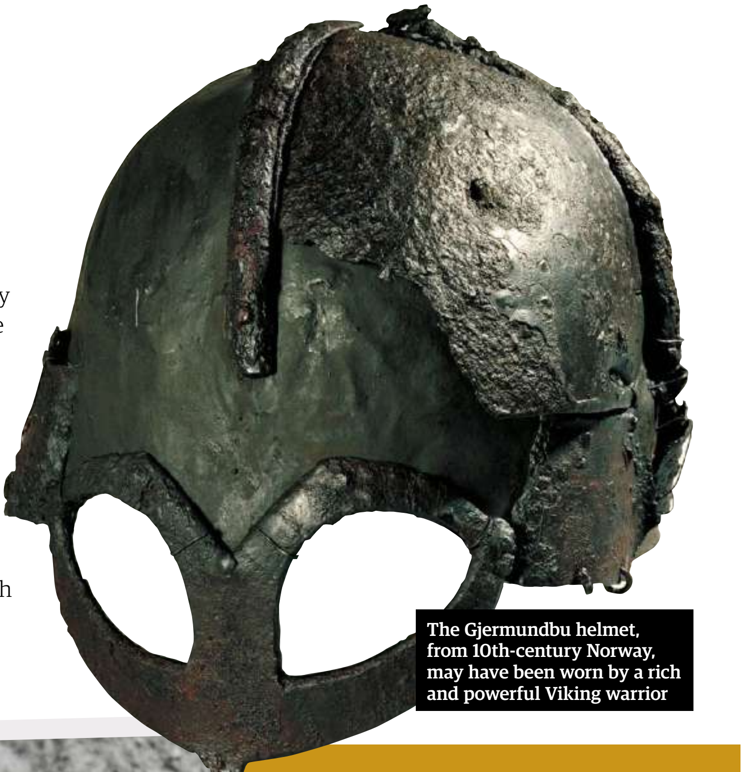
2 THEY WERE TERRIBLE AT MAKING SHOES

Viking footwear was fast fashion

Despite the fact that they lived in cold, challenging terrain that often mixed wet, snowy and icy conditions with volcanic rock, slippery ship decks and beach sand, the Vikings as a whole made and wore poorly constructed and simple shoes that lasted for little over a month and a half at a time. Middens full of cheap, badly made and brutally worn shoes have been discovered in Viking Age excavations throughout their territories. Vikings in England went in for some trendier styles, with Medieval pointed toes.

3 THEY DIDN'T WEAR HORNED HELMETS

In fact, most Vikings didn't wear helmets at all – only the remnants of five Scandinavian helmets from the Viking Age have ever been found. Helmets were made of iron, a rare resource that was put to much better use making blades for swords and axes. It's been suggested that the Vikings were depicted with horned helmets by Christian victims of their raids, who caricatured them to look like demons, or that the iconography comes from a much later source: the costumes in the first performances of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle* of operas in the late 19th century. In practice, they would have been highly impractical in battle.



The Gjermundbu helmet, from 10th-century Norway, may have been worn by a rich and powerful Viking warrior

Anne Stine Ingstad excavating the Viking settlement she and her husband found at L'Anse aux Meadows, Canada

4 THEY COULDN'T KNIT

Woollens would have come in handy too

Living as they did in the colder regions of the world, we subconsciously expect the Vikings to have worn a host of warm garments, not just of fur but of wool too. Yet while they did use sheepskin, and they did card, spin and weave fibre, knitting was unknown to them. Viking socks were created using a technique called nálbinding, or needle-binding, which creates fabric in a spiral form that has more in common with crochet techniques than with knitting. In the hands of a skilled practitioner, however, it's incredibly fast.

5 THEY VISITED NORTH AMERICA 500 YEARS BEFORE COLUMBUS

The Saga of the Greenlanders and *The Saga of Erik the Red* both tell the tale of Viking explorer Leif Erikson, who sets out for a rumoured land to the west of the Atlantic and founds a short-lived colony there. In 1960, husband and wife archaeologists Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad began excavating a site called L'Anse aux Meadows, on the Great Northern Peninsular in Newfoundland, Canada. They uncovered the remains of a small village of eight buildings: a few homes and a smithy, a carpenter's shop and a boatbuilder's shed, as well as everyday Norse items including lamps, spindles, pins and needles, suggesting that women lived there as well as men.

6 THEY WERE FOND OF HONEY…

SWEET TREATS WERE HARD TO COME BY

The places they visited might have offered exotic fruits and other tempting foodstuffs, but back home in the north the Scandinavians had to make do with seasonal fruits and honey, which they often used to brew or flavour mead, a strong fortified wine. They also had to tempt wild bees into their hives every year then drown the colony to get to the honey.

7 …BUT THEY HAD GOOD TEETH

THEY MAY HAVE LIKED SWEET THINGS, BUT VIKINGS DIDN'T GET THEM VERY OFTEN

Archaeological evidence shows that despite their fondness for alcohol and sweet things, Viking populations didn't get enough of them to rot their teeth; plaque was much more of a problem. In fact, they went in for extensive teeth modifications, filing them into shapes and even engraving and dyeing patterns into them.

8 THEY BELIEVED IN ENCHANTMENT

VIKING SORCERERS COULD SING THE SEA TO SLEEP

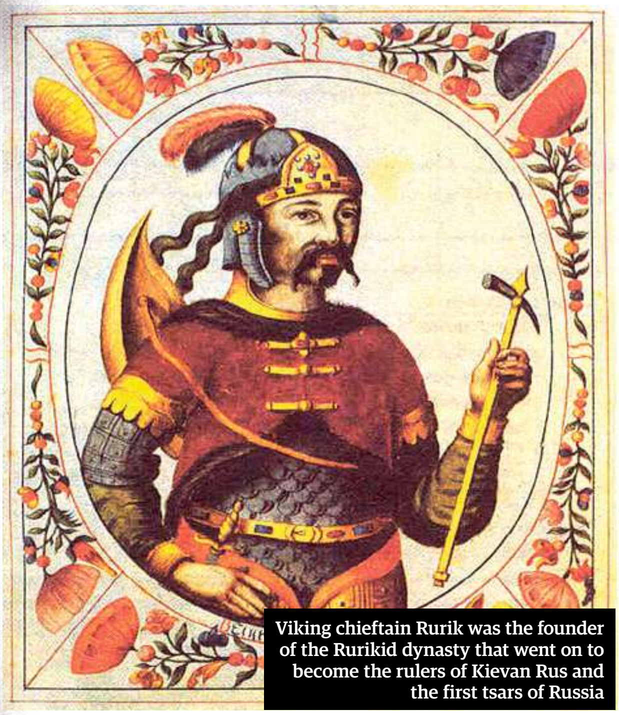
Several different types of magic are attested to in Viking myth, but one of the most intriguing, and the one that has contributed the most to fairy tales and fantasy fiction, is called galdr. Focused on magical songs, it was literal enchantment, and we derive the word for a particularly beautifully voiced songbird, the nightingale, from it today.

Images: Sören Hallgren/Statens historiska museum CC BY-SA 3.0 (buddha), NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet CC BY-SA 2.0 (helmet), Getty Images (honey)

9 THEY WERE A VAIN PEOPLE

The Viking reputation for filth is a much later invention

Later representations (often by their victims) portray the Vikings as filthy and unwashed, stinking of poorly cured furs and skins and the stench of the sea. Maybe this was the case when they were streaming off a longboat and into an attack, but in general both male and female Vikings were incredibly vain, with high standards of personal hygiene. They bathed and washed their long, often elaborately styled hair frequently and enjoyed perfumes and colourful clothes, jewellery and tattoos. Famed poet Snorri Sturluson apparently spent hours in his hot-spring bath every day, while treaties with the Byzantines stipulated that the Norse could access baths "whenever they want".


Viking chieftain Rurik was the founder of the Rurikid dynasty that went on to become the rulers of Kievan Rus and the first tsars of Russia

10 THE NORMANS WERE VIKINGS…

The clue is in the name: 'Norman' derives from Low Frankonian 'Nortmann', or Old Norse 'Norðmaðr', and means 'north man'. Settling in the area of France that would soon come to bear their name in 911 under the auspices of their leader, Rollo, they brokered a treaty with West Francia's king, Charles the III (often known as Charles the Simple) that saw them take possession of what would become the Duchy of Normandy in exchange for protecting the rest of the area against other Vikings. They ended up creating a unique Franco-Norse society that would briefly dominate Europe.

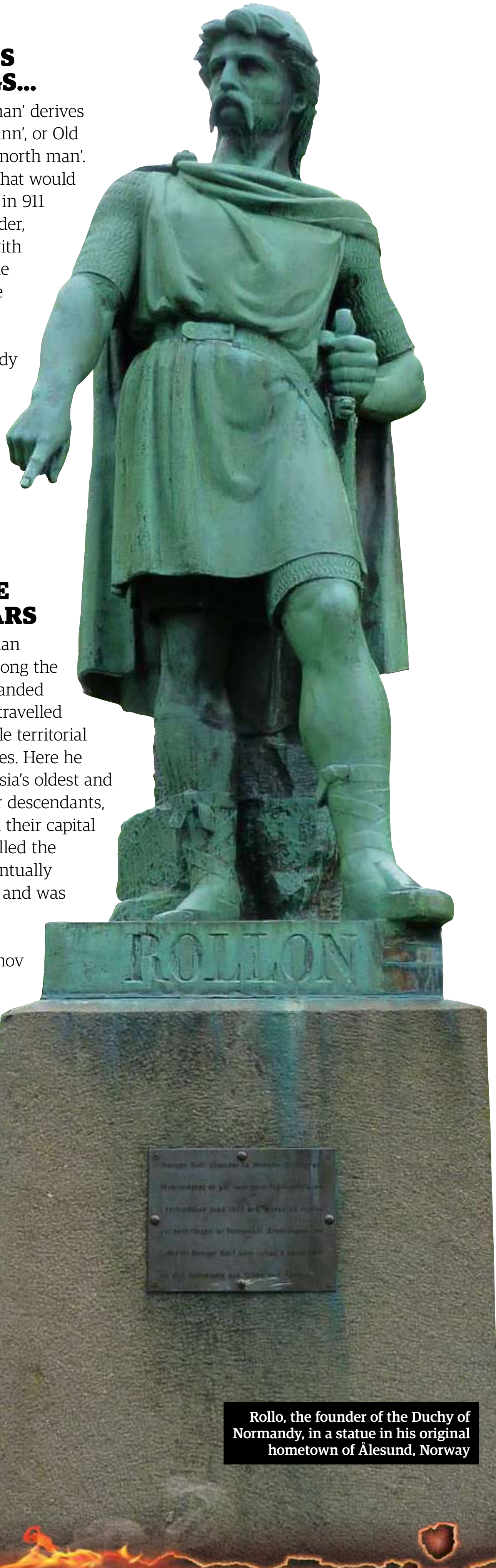
11 …AND SO WERE THE FIRST TSARS

In the 9th century the Varangian Rurik, who was a chieftain among the Rus (the Vikings who had expanded east into what is now Russia), travelled further into the interior to settle territorial disputes among the Slavic tribes. Here he founded Novgorod, one of Russia's oldest and most important cities. His later descendants, known as the Rurikids, moved their capital to Kiev and founded a state called the Kievan Rus. The royal line eventually became the tsardom of Russia and was ruled by descendants of Rurik until 1598, when they were replaced by the ill-fated Romanov dynasty. Many old Russian families still claim descent from Rurik to this day.

12 THEY MADE POISONOUS BREAD

It wasn't a strong point

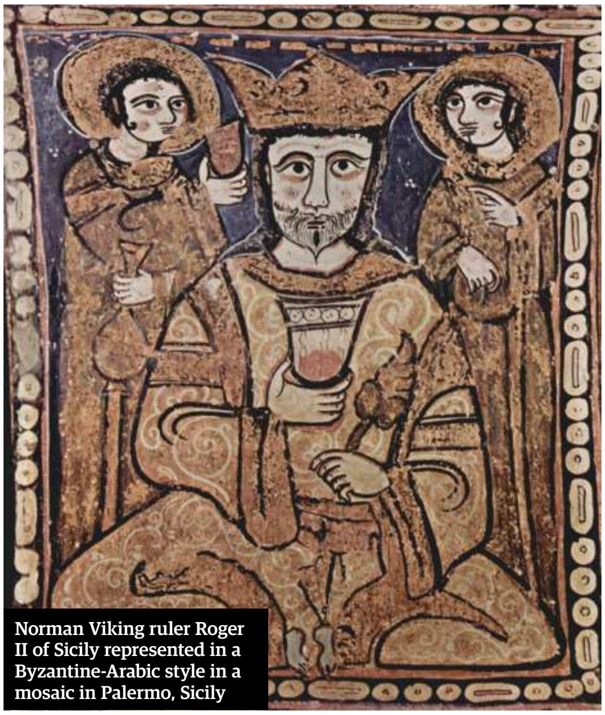
The Viking homelands weren't brilliant for growing food crops; instead, Vikings in these areas ate a lot of meat, fish, dairy produce, vegetables and herbs. The introduction of the plough made it somewhat easier for them to grow wheat and rye on a scale large enough to regularly manufacture bread, but their relative inexperience with it showed in the poorly understood and slapdash way it was made. In Viking York, research has shown that seeds from cornfield weeds were often left in their flour, including those of corncockle, a common weed whose seeds are poisonous and would have made those who ate it ill.



Rollo, the founder of the Duchy of Normandy, in a statue in his original hometown of Ålesund, Norway

13 THEY RULED SICILY

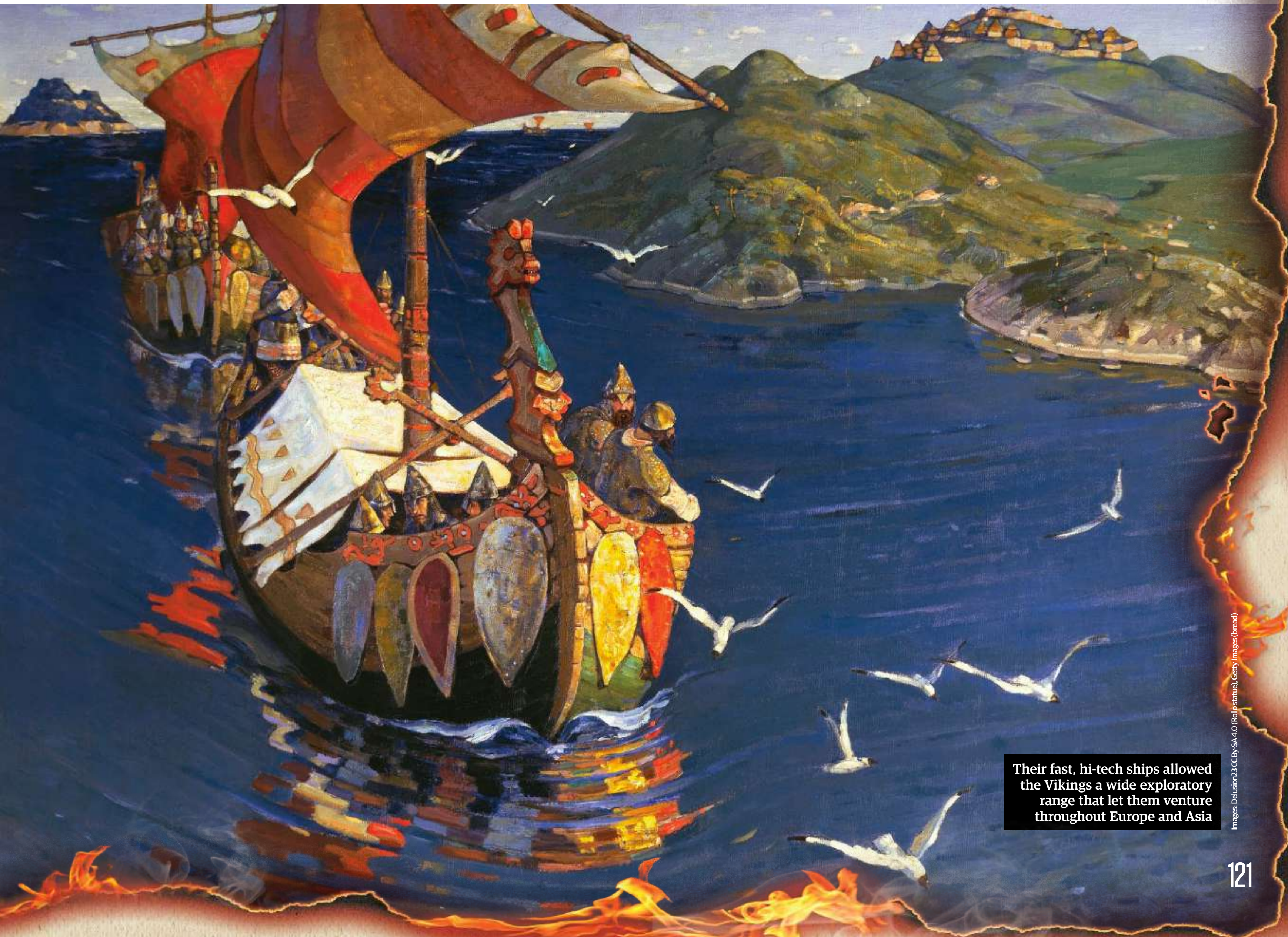
The Italian island of Sicily had been under Arabic rule for centuries when Norman Viking Roger of Hautville and his brother Robert 'the Fox' Guiscard and their troops wrested it from their hands in 1063. Like other Norman Vikings, Roger's retinue soon embraced the culture of their conquest - the tongue-twistingly named Norman-Arab-Byzantine culture is a hybrid of the three civilisations that then populated the island. It became a centre of Medieval learning, well-fed and prosperous thanks to Arabic farming techniques, and its scholars translated many classical Greek works into Latin. One of the greatest geographical works of the Middle Ages was written by the Andalusian Arabian Al-Idrisi for Roger II of Sicily.



Norman Viking ruler Roger II of Sicily represented in a Byzantine-Arabic style in a mosaic in Palermo, Sicily

14 THEY TRAVELLED FURTHER THAN YOU THINK

Not only did the Vikings set up a short-lived colony in North America, they also travelled extensively throughout Europe and Asia. They settled throughout Scandinavia and in Russia, Sicily, Italy, and even a few colonies scattered throughout the Levant and the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. Some of the most reliable contemporary records we have of Viking customs come from their fellow travellers: our best record of a Viking funeral comes from an Arab called Ibn-Fadlan, who was fascinated by these tall, beautiful, ruddy-haired people. Norwegian King Harald Hardrada served as a mercenary in Palestine before he was crowned. Scandinavians are even thought to have visited the Iraqi capital of Baghdad as early as the year 800.



Their fast, hi-tech ships allowed the Vikings a wide exploratory range that let them venture throughout Europe and Asia

Images: Delusion23 CC By-SA 4.0 (Rollo statue), Getty Images (bread)

15 THEY LOVED EXTREME SPORTS

KNIFE JUGGLING, ANYONE?

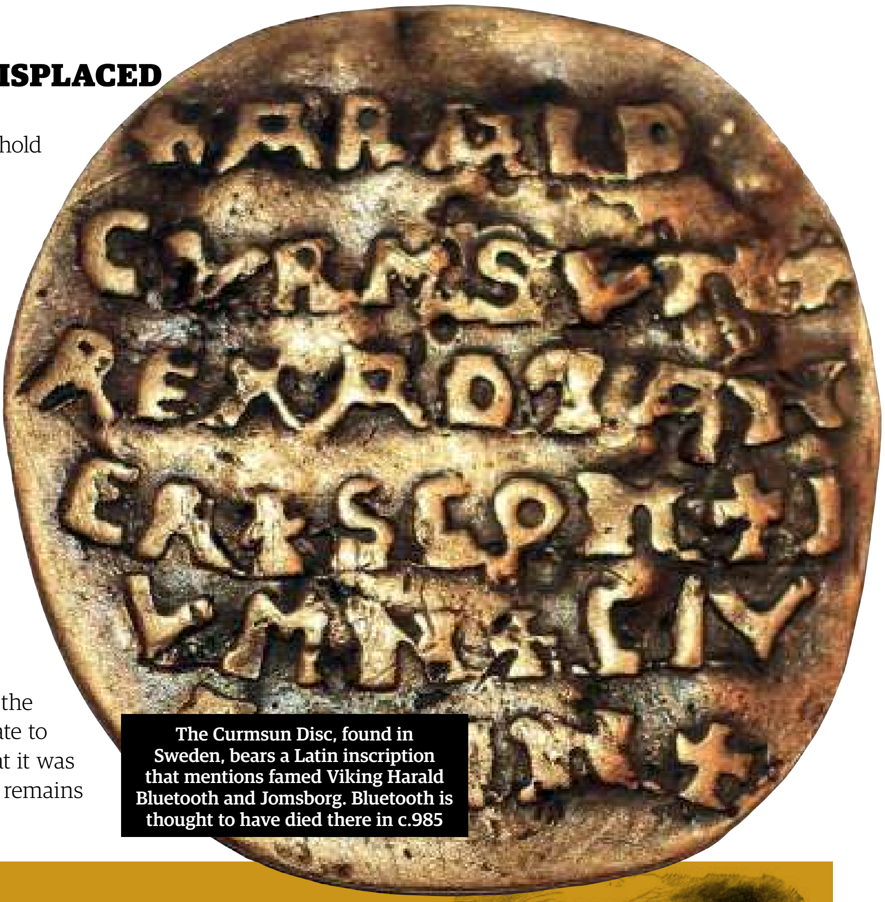
The Vikings brought the same crazy enthusiasm to sport as they did to everything else. A lot of their sports revolved around combat skills: wrestling, swordsmanship, spear throwing, running and jumping between the oars of a moving longship and even knife juggling. They also enjoyed swimming, skiing, ice skating and a particularly violent variant of hockey called knattleik.

16 THEY WERE HUGE FANS OF ASIA

"Everything in that part of the world is beautiful and stately," Snorri Sturluson wrote breathlessly in the Prologue to the *Prose Edda*. His fellow Norse agreed; they bought clothes and jewels and artefacts from as far east as they could find and cultivated trade links along the Silk Road all the way to China. Runestones found in Scandinavia recall Vikings who perished in 'Serkland' (Arabia).

17 THEY MAY HAVE MISPLACED AN ENTIRE CITY

Contemporary accounts tell of a stronghold city somewhere on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea called Jómsborg. We know that the Vikings travelled and settled extensively in this area; it was a source of the Baltic amber that they traded with southern Europe and the Middle East. Two of the sagas, *Knytlinga saga* and *Fagrskinna*, mention events that occur in the city, which was populated by the Jomsvikings, an order of pagan mercenaries that obeyed only their leader and lived in a strictly ordered militaristic society. According to the *Heimskringla saga*, the city was razed to the ground in 1043 by Magnus the Good, the Christian king of both Denmark and Norway. Archaeological evidence of it has never been found in the sites that archaeologists suspect correlate to its location, leading them to believe that it was either a Spartan-style legend or that its remains were swallowed by the sea.

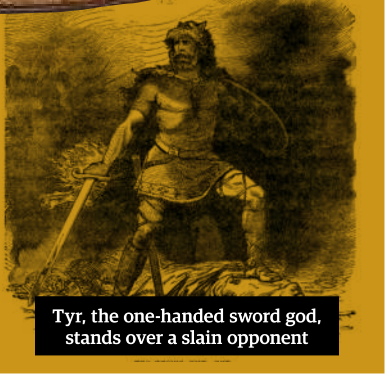


The Curmsun Disc, found in Sweden, bears a Latin inscription that mentions famed Viking Harald Bluetooth and Jomsborg. Bluetooth is thought to have died there in c.985

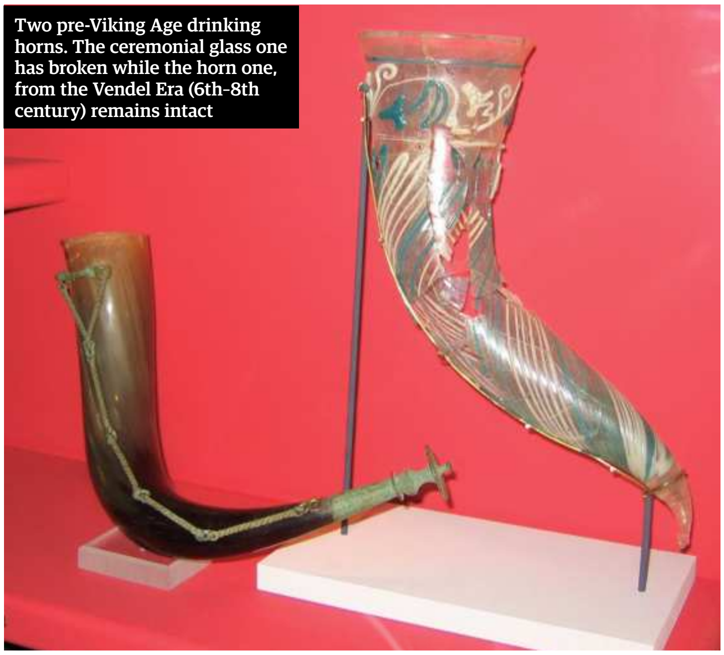
18 THEY HAD SOME REALLY STRANGE GODS

Life, love, death... and skiing?

Pre-Christian Scandinavia had an extensive pantheon of gods and mythical beings. The first, Ymir, from whom the world was made, was nourished by a giant cow who licked the next lot of gods from the ice of the universe. Other key figures included Skoll and Hati, two wolves who tried to eat the sun and moon, and Skaði, a giant goddess of skiing. She had a rivalry with fellow god Loki, and some of Norse mythology's strangest stories involve them, such as the time Loki tied his testicles to a goat to make her laugh.



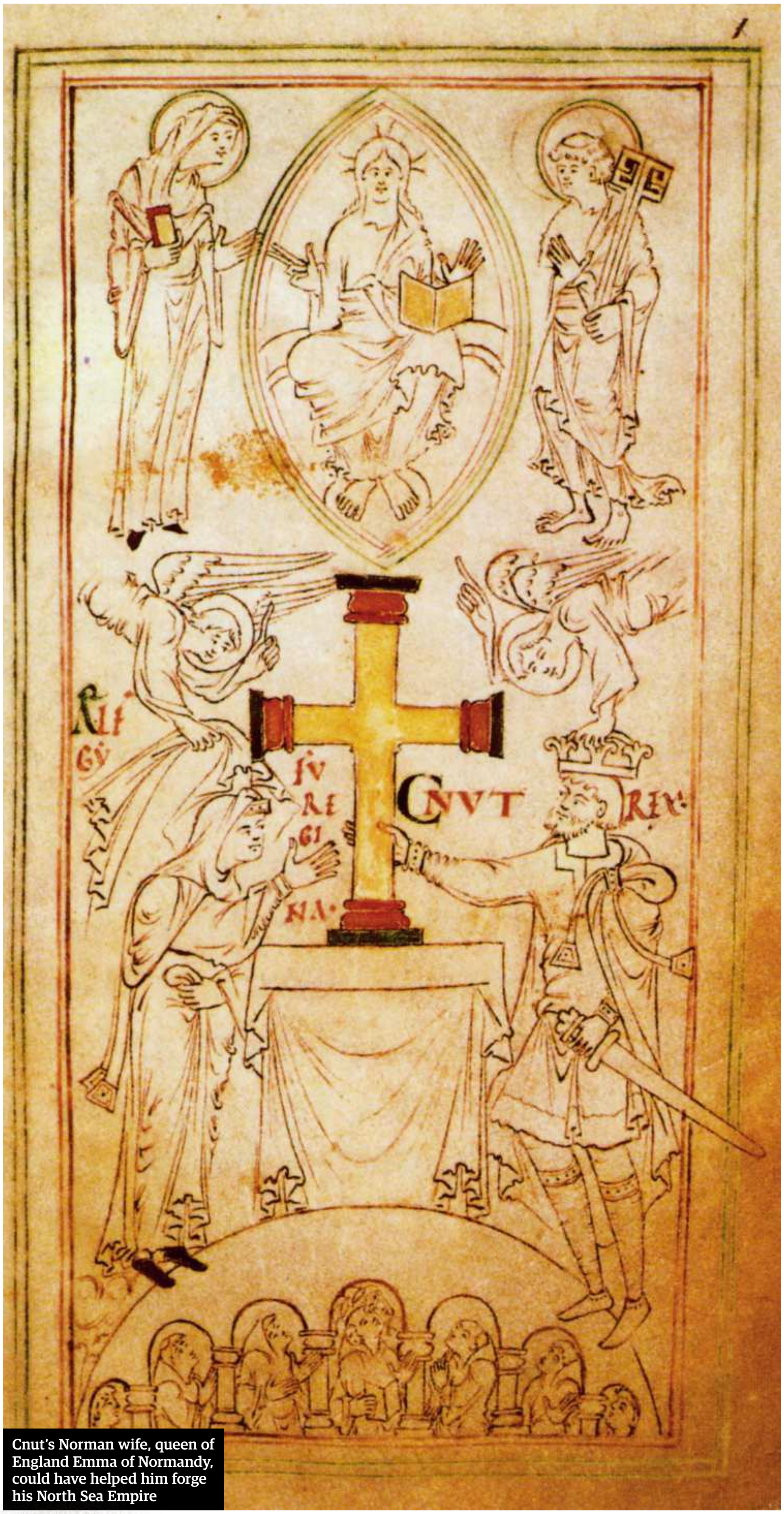
Tyr, the one-handed sword god, stands over a slain opponent



Two pre-Viking Age drinking horns. The ceremonial glass one has broken while the horn one, from the Vendel Era (6th-8th century) remains intact

19 THEY DIDN'T DRINK OUT OF SKULLS

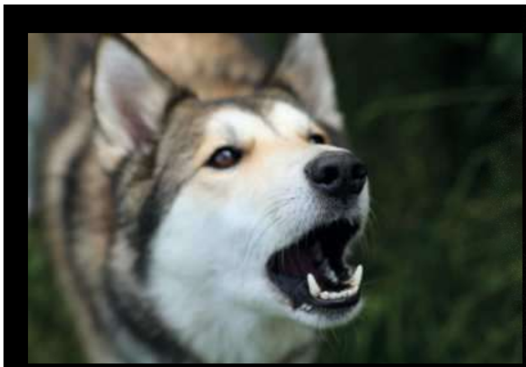
Along with the horned helmets myth comes the inaccurate iconography of Viking warriors drinking from the skulls of their slain enemies – an image that pulp writers like Robert E Howard, creator of *Conan the Barbarian*, revelled in. In fact, the Vikings drank from hollowed and polished animal horns, usually made from the horns of bovids like oxen and bulls – they were more common, less breakable and a lot easier to produce for Nordic artisans than the expensive glass or clay drinking vessels found in some of the southern cities the Norse visited. The mistake is a result of a mistranslation of the kenning phrase 'ór bjúgviðum hausa' ('branches of skulls') to describe drinking vessels in a 17th-century translation of a poem called *Krákumál,* which recounts the gruesome death of the semi-legendary warrior-king Ragnar Loðbrók.



Cnut's Norman wife, queen of England Emma of Normandy, could have helped him forge his North Sea Empire

20 THEY WERE ON THE WAY TO AN EMPIRE

In British pop culture, King Cnut is often remembered as a silly Viking king shouting at the sea (he was actually trying to prove to his new English courtiers that they could be sensible rather than sycophantic and stop making ridiculous claims like the sea would obey him). In fact, Cnut the Great was on his way to becoming the first Viking emperor. Historians today often refer to his conjoined territories of Denmark, Norway and England as the 'North Sea Empire'. Cnut was married to Emma of Normandy, queen of England by her previous marriage to English king Aethelred the Unready and a princess of the Viking-Norman court, with additional connections to both Denmark and to the Normans expanding into Italy. The empire wasn't to be: their son Harthacnut died early in his reign and was followed on the English throne by Emma and Aethelred's son, Edward the Confessor; Denmark and Norway defaulted to other relatives.



21 THEY GAVE ENGLISH A LOT OF WORDS

Angry bugs and glitter in your cake will make you sick

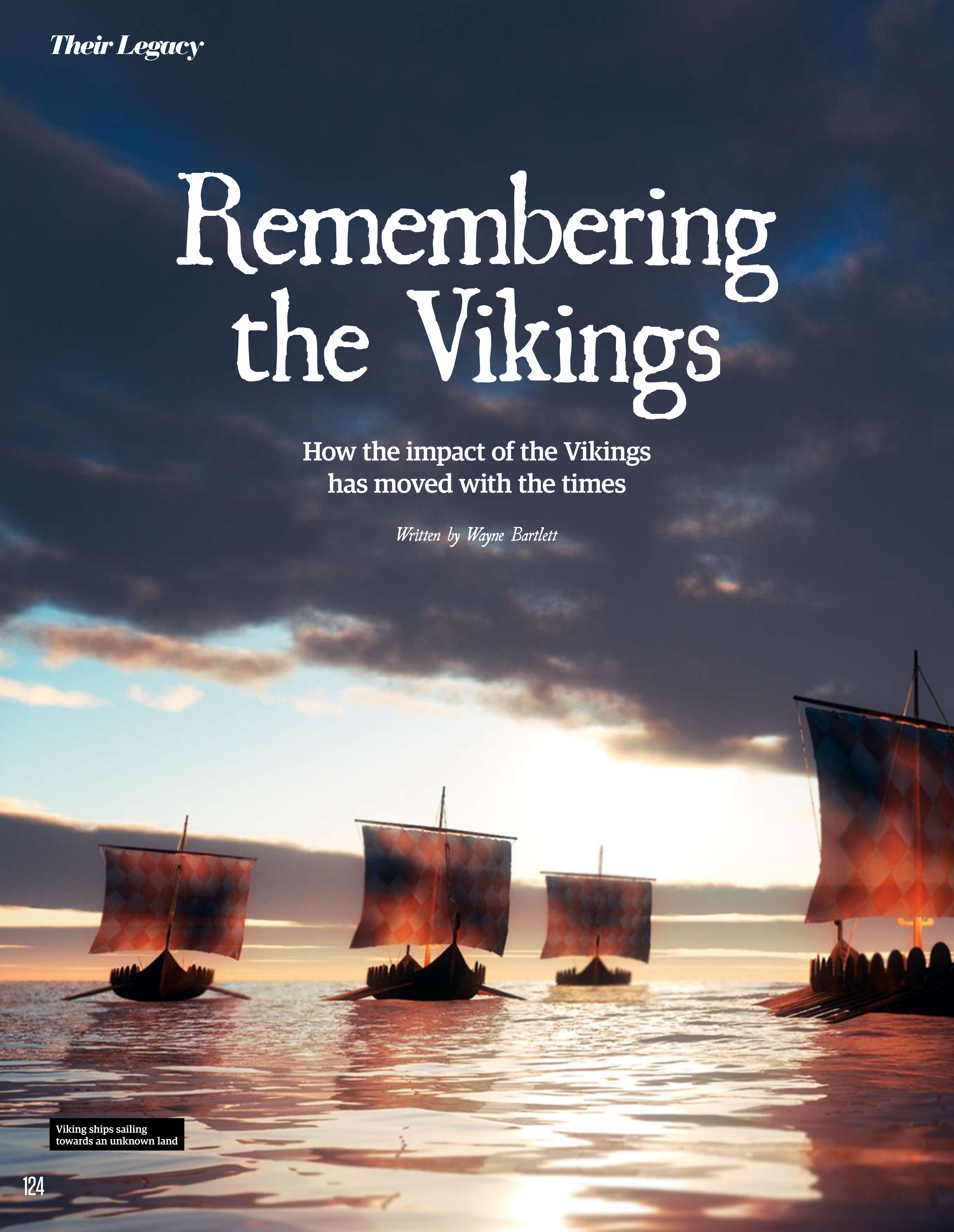
Not only did it give us most of the words in the sentence above, but the Old Norse language spoken by the Vikings contributed a vast amount of vocabulary for all sorts of things to the English language. 'Happy' is a particularly cheering example; others include 'awkward' ('ǫfugr' - turned backward; 'weard' - direction), 'bark' (Viking dogs said "bǫrkr bǫrkr bǫrkr", which is adorable), and 'bask' ('baðask'; to lounge in the bath). A more surprising example is 'ombudsman' ('umboðsmaðr'), but then they did give us a lot of our legal system too.

Images: Getty Images (swords on beach, Chinese house, Viking God, dog); Tomasz Sielski (Curmsun Disc), Berig (horns) CC BY-SA 3.0

Remembering the Vikings

How the impact of the Vikings has moved with the times

Written by Wayne Bartlett



Viking ships sailing towards an unknown land

Perceptions of the Vikings have adapted to the changing needs of society as they have evolved from one period of history to the next. Initially they were seen as some kind of demonic punishment unleashed on a sinful world, but the image later mutated through various iterations that in some way or another mirrored contemporary requirements. As is often the case with historical figures, a basis in fact has gradually been added to until in the end we arrive at a point where it can be difficult to differentiate history from myth and legend. Yet for all that, the impact of the Viking legacy has been profound and shows little sign of diminishing any time soon.

First impressions

Accounts of Viking raids were mostly written up by monks and other clerical commentators who were often on the wrong end of such activities. Most famously, the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 CE was seen as a punishment from God. The famous contemporary scholar Alcuin unashamedly berated monks and laymen alike for their sinful behaviour, suggesting that their many faults, ranging from excessive drinking and widespread fornication to emulating pagan costume and hairstyles, meant that the devastation unleashed on Saint Cuthbert's resting place was entirely justified. In his view of the world, the Vikings were not so much instruments of the devil as avengers sent from God to chastise His people for their loose morals.

Much can be read into what the Vikings were called by contemporaries. They were often labelled with terms that emphasised their anti-Christian attributes, such as 'heathens', 'Gentiles' or straightforward 'pagans'. A 9th-century observer, Ermentarius of Noirmoutier, whose own establishment was a victim of Viking raids, recalled the words of the biblical prophet Jeremiah, who had foretold that "out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land". It was a description that fitted the Vikings perfectly. Arriving unannounced in their terrifying longships, they unleashed chaos and typically escaped again before the local militias of the areas they attacked had a chance to respond.

> "The raid on Lindisfarne in 793 CE was seen as a punishment from God"

Ironically, some Vikings became fanatical adherents to the Christian cause. Kings like Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway or Cnut the Great, with his Anglo-Danish Empire, were avid sponsors of Christianity, donating extravagant gifts to monasteries and churches and enforcing conversion to the new faith among their subjects. Cnut and others like Sitriuc Silkbeard, king of Dublin, even visited Rome on missions that were part politically inspired and part pilgrimage. One man, King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway (reigned 1015–28), became a Christian saint within a few years of his death and churches dedicated to him sprung up across Europe from Russia to Ireland. It did not take long for perceptions to evolve; despite the fact that he was killed in what was effectively a rather grubby civil war, Saint Óláfr quickly came to be seen as a Christian martyr. By becoming Christians, such men radically changed the way they were perceived by subsequent history.

An evolving saga

Much of what we know, or at least what we think we know, about the Vikings comes from sagas written in Iceland, especially in the 13th century, though some are older than this. These sagas were records of a long-lost age often referring back to events several centuries before in Norway in particular, as well as to the early days of Viking settlement in Iceland or colonisation elsewhere, such as in Orkney.

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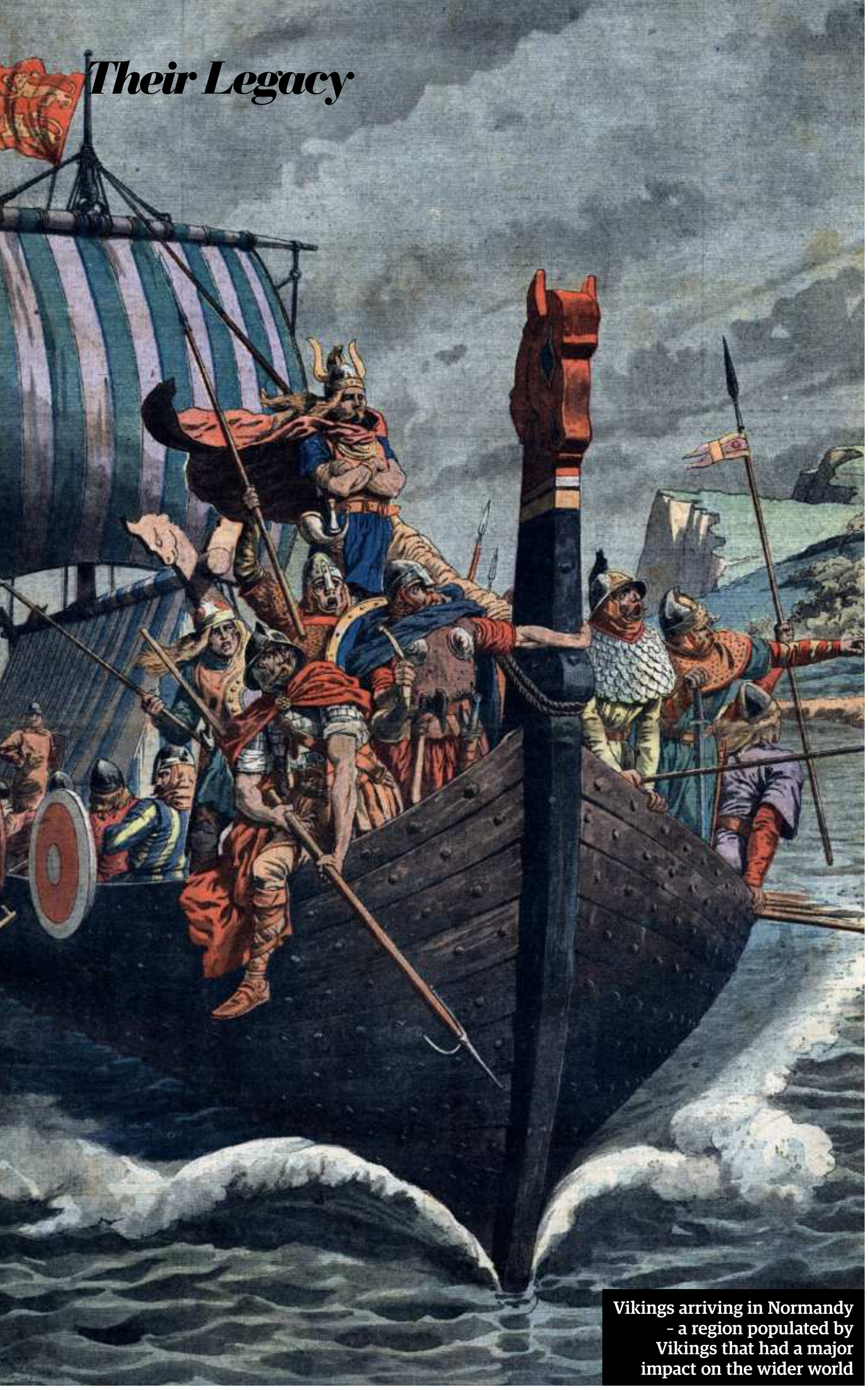


Vikings arriving in Normandy – a region populated by Vikings that had a major impact on the wider world

A modern statue of a Viking ship at Reykjavík shows how the Viking spirit continues to inspire their distant descendants

The ceremony of Up Helly Aa, held in Shetland, involves the burning of a Viking ship

Lindisfarne, site of the first recorded major Viking raid

While the sagas claimed to be based on history, it is difficult to be sure about how much in them is fact and how much is fiction. There were magical elements such as dragons, dwarves, magical rings, witches and warlocks, but alongside these fantastical accounts more mundane details were included. The latter are inherently more likely to be based on some kind of reality, albeit one that has been distorted, accidentally or otherwise, over time, but they are also hard to prove with details that have been passed down through oral storytelling rather than written records.

Master storytellers such as Snorri Sturluson wrote vivid accounts of various historical Viking figures. What is interesting in their portrayals is how their heroes and heroines are often portrayed as pious Christians while their opponents are equally often portrayed as pagans.

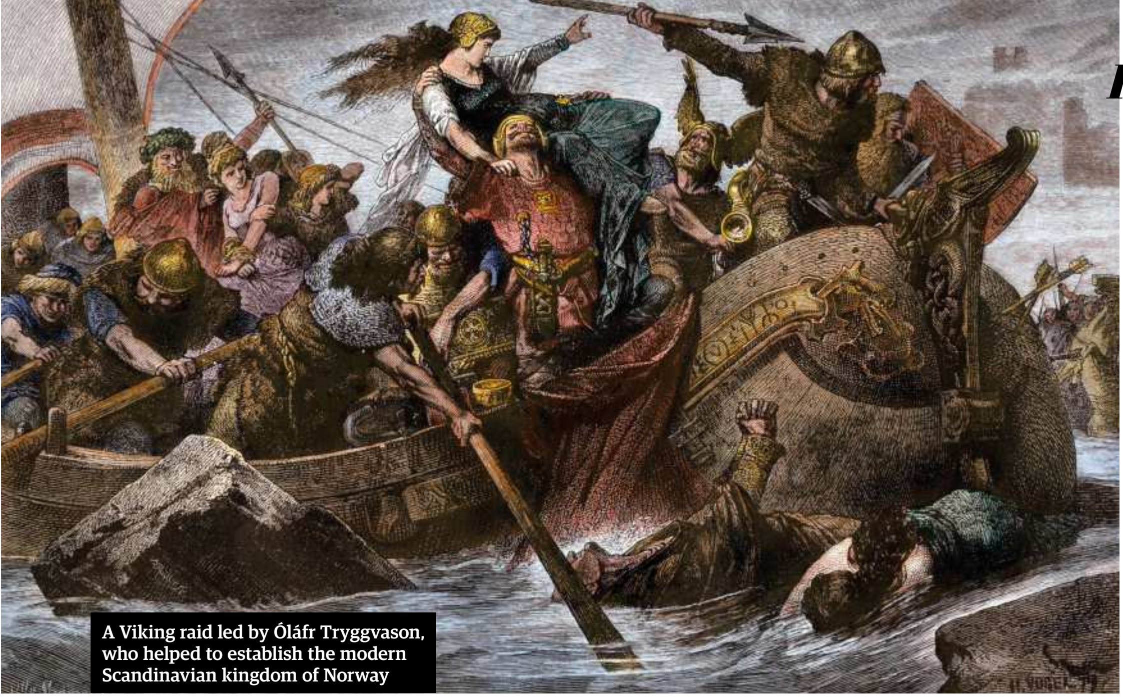
For example, accounts of the Viking colonisation of Vinland (North America) include reports of two women, Gudrid, who is a staunch Christian, and Freydis, who is a pagan. The Christian Gudrid is a stereotypical virtuous family maker (supposedly in fact the first European woman to give birth to a child in North America), while the pagan Freydis is a scheming murderess. The two women are deliberately presented as figures in contrast. But in all likelihood Snorri and his ilk are crafting characters for their own time (Iceland had been a Christian country for over 200 years when he wrote) rather than meticulously recreating a genuine historical account. The stories of the Viking past were already evolving to suit the purposes of later writers.

In a nation-building age

As late as 1645, the stories of Viking outrages against Christianity remained the most powerful image concerning the Norsemen. When in that year a papal delegate, Giovanni Battista Rinuccini, visited Ireland, he came armed with a briefing that told how Christianity had been virtually obliterated by the Norsemen in the country. While it was undoubtedly true that many holy sites such as Kells and Cashel had been pillaged by Vikings, this was a gross exaggeration, and many Norse residents of the island, such as the aforementioned Sitriuc Silkbeard, proved strong advocates of Christianity. Indeed, on his return from Rome, Sitriuc had ordered the construction of a cathedral in Dublin.

But nascent nationalism, in the 19th century in particular, rehabilitated the Vikings in many quarters. Scandinavian historians exploited the positive virtues of heroes from the past, mining their reputation as both mighty warriors and great explorers. Men like Rollo, the founder of Viking Normandy, proved so popular that there was even a squabble between academics concerning whether he belonged to Norway or Denmark.

Viking achievements resonated with nation states in Scandinavia seeking to emphasise their place in the world. Powerful kings such as the 'Óláfrs' (Tryggvason and Haraldsson) and Harald



A Viking raid led by Óláfr Tryggvason, who helped to establish the modern Scandinavian kingdom of Norway

Hardrada of Norway, or Harald Bluetooth, Sveinn Forkbeard and Cnut the Great of Denmark, became desirable role models to emulate. The discovery of magnificent ship burials at Oseberg and Gokstad during the period merely reinforced the image of a magnificent Viking past. And when the United States celebrated the quatercentenary of the 'discovery' of North America in 1892, a year later Captain Magnus Andersen sailed across the Atlantic in a replica longship from Norway to Chicago as a reminder of just which Europeans arrived there first.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Scandinavians gloried in their Viking past, but other countries also proudly claimed a Norse heritage. George Darley, an Anglo-Irish writer, declared with some pride in 1841 that the sea-kings of Scandinavia were the ancestors of modern Britons with their "enterprising character" as well as their "poetic genius". It was no longer a mark of shame to have Viking blood flowing through one's veins.

Others jumped on the Viking bandwagon. The commencement of the ceremony known as Up Helly Aa in Shetland in 1881, still an annual ceremony culminating in the torching of a Viking longship, touched folk memories in a part of the world where DNA testing has proved very strong Norse roots.

The box office

The Vikings were 'box office' even in the 19th century. Most famously, Wagner fully tapped into the dramatic power of Norse sagas in *Ring Cycle*. In the 20th century, JRR Tolkien made great use of similar themes in his works, most famously in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. It is interesting though that even Tolkien creates new images. Gandalf, a dwarf in the sagas (specifically the *Völuspá* from the *Poetic Edda*), becomes a wizard. Such cultural references collectively helped forge an image of a heroic warrior-race steeped in the quest for glory and desirous first and foremost for a hero's end in battle and a journey to Valhalla.

Hollywood has made full use of the Vikings and their cultural legacy. But even here the picture evolves over time. The 1958 epic *The Vikings*, starring Kirk Douglas, Tony Curtis and Ernest Borgnine, is a blockbusting, swashbuckling epic from an era that specialised in such movies. More recent productions give a different perspective playing to a more contemporary audience.

The HBO series *Vikings*, which first hit TV screens in 2013, is altogether darker; the violence is more graphic, the licentiousness is more pronounced and the magic is more accentuated - Vikings for our times. But they also come in different shapes and sizes.

Thor: Ragnarök (2017) is based on a comic-book hero with characters ranging from the eponymous lead to other Norse deities including Odin, Loki and Heimdall. There is no one-size-fits-all portrayal of the Vikings even now.

There is something undeniably 'other' about the Vikings. They play to deep-rooted fears and nightmares of shadowy terrors that jump out from the darkness, but the fact that the Vikings were also very multi-dimensional characters serves to remind us of how difficult they are to pigeonhole while at the same time making their cultural legacy as powerful and mesmerising as ever.

A legacy in language

How Norse lives on

Everyday English speakers around the world utter Norse words without realising it. Viking vocabulary lives on in words such as husband (Norse hūs bóndi – house occupier) and law (lag). Hel is a place where the dead go unless they are 'fortunate' enough to die in battle, in which case Valhalla is their destination. Some very mundane words also have their origin in Norse, such as 'dirt', 'muck' and 'rotten'. Even the names of food are sometimes derived from similar roots, such as 'cake' and 'egg'. It is not only the English language that includes Norse loan words either. For example, in Irish, 'beer' and 'market' are derived from Scandinavian, suggesting how everyday Viking activities impacted on life on the island a millennium ago.

Place names too reveal Viking antecedents. Those ending in -by, for example, such as Derby and Grimsby, were once in Viking Danelaw in the East Midlands of England. Those with a 'thorpe' ending (e.g. Scunthorpe) were also once Viking settlements. In Scotland, the island of Skye and the northwest point of mainland Britain, Cape Wrath (from hvarf – 'turning point', where Viking ships would turn south towards the Irish Sea) also have Viking roots. The Vikings live on in the very names of the places around us.

GOODRAMGATE

Memories of a time long past - Guthrum's Street in York, based on a famous Viking name

The Vikings' naval prowess opened up a world of opportunities

Images: Getty Images (Arriving in Normandy, statue, Up Helly Aa, replica), Alamy (Lord of the Rings, raid), © WB Bartlett (Lindisfarne, Goodramgate)

Tolkien's vivid imagination ensures that memories of the Vikings live on

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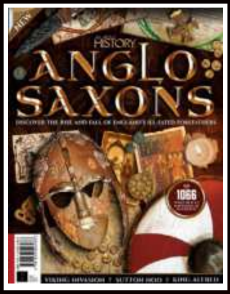
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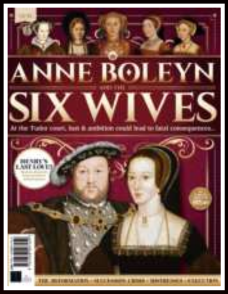
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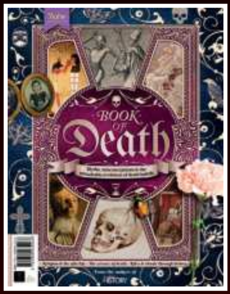
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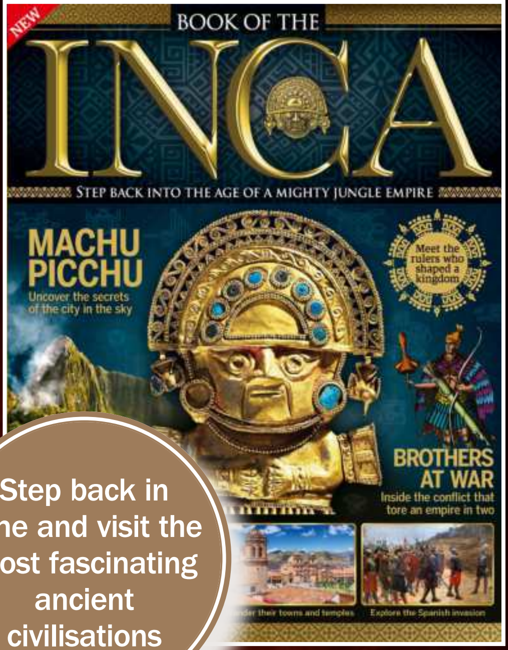
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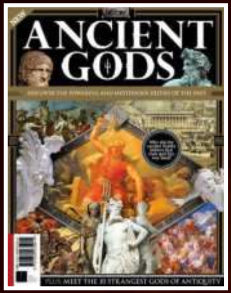
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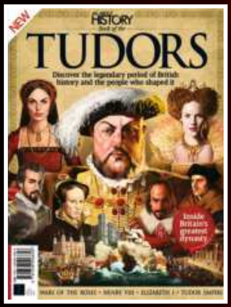

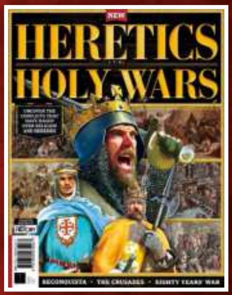
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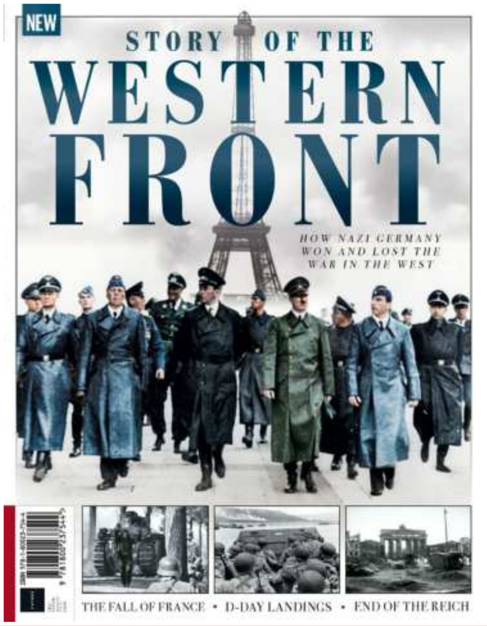
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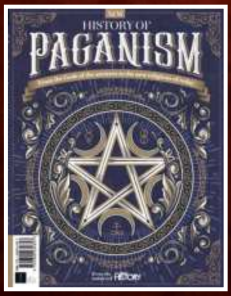
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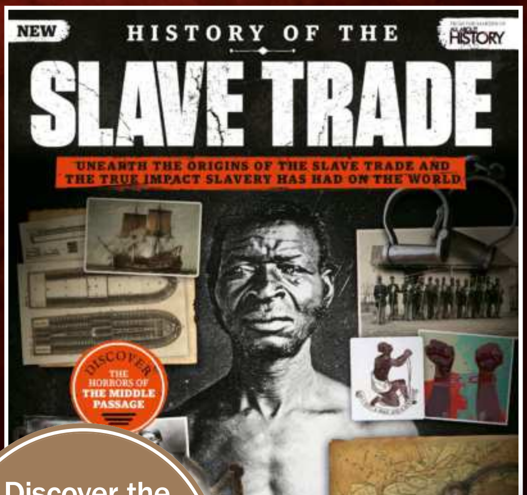
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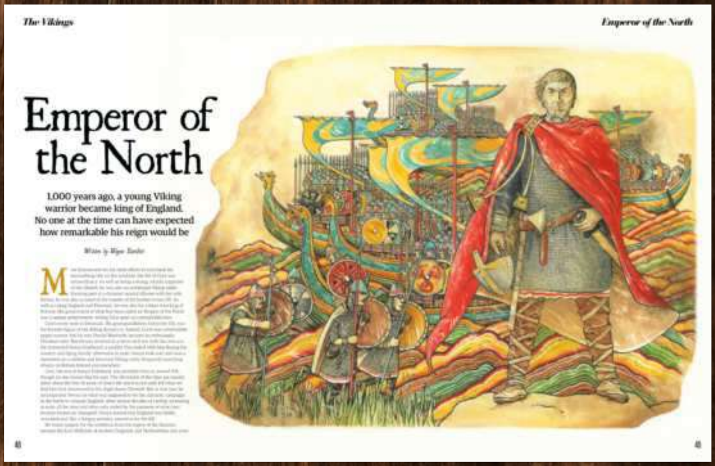

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Emperor of the North

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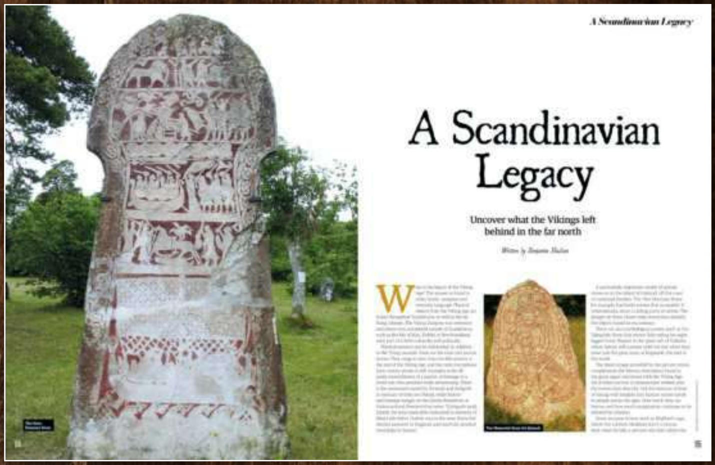

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